

A black and white illustration of a ladder against a blue background. A hand is reaching up towards the top of the ladder. The title 'A Ladder' is written in large, bold, black letters with a white outline, positioned at the top of the ladder.

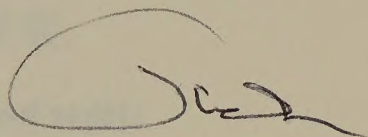
# A Ladder

**A FUTURISTIC  
AND  
ICONOCLASTIC  
NOVELLA**

**JACK R.  
PYLE**



To Steve -  
master of the  
multi-peopled  
saga.

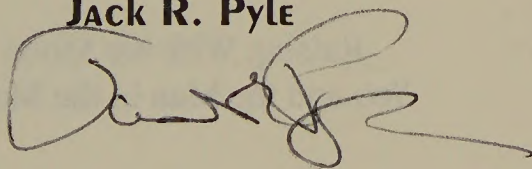
A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Steve', written in a cursive style.

# **A Ladder**

**A FUTURISTIC AND ICONOCLASTIC NOVELLA**

by

**Jack R. Pyle**

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Jack R. Pyle', written in a cursive style.



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After Many a Summer

A Time for You

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Raising With the Moon

You and the Man in the Moon

# **A Ladder**

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by

**Jack R. Pyle**

Parkway Publishers, Inc  
Boone, North Carolina

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This book is dedicated to the memory of:

Walter Rein  
a man among men,  
a writer and a dear friend  
without whose mentoring—  
whether or not he was aware of it—  
this book  
would never have been written





## Chapter One

### **"IN THE BEGINNING..."**

I'll be damned if the whole thing didn't start out like a second-rate pulp novel. You may remember them. Back then the writer was paid a penny a word or less and the paperback book may have been worth every cent of it—but not much more. Most of it was claptrap. Where am I? Who am I? Who are you?

All the same, that's the way it happened to me, but this was not pulp fiction.

Of one thing I was certain: I was awake now, wide awake.

How long had I slept? And, of course, why am I here? Those were the first thoughts that rushed into my mind.

You talk about a bad dream.

I was on a bed, a single bed. This was not my room. As I looked around, it became clearer. I was in some kind of a hospital room or maybe a lab. This was a workroom of some sort, not a bedroom. The walls and almost everything there were white. Sterile.

And then I saw him. A slim man of about my age or perhaps a little older. He could be thirty or thirty-five. And he was dressed in white, in a kind of short, white tunic or loose-fitting robe. Not hospital garb. Not like anything I had ever seen before.

And then he saw me.

"You're awake. Dr. Ethringer said it might be any day now. You've been restless according to the chart, and noisy. He

## A Ladder

expected a change. He wasn't sure what that change might be, so we were all told to be in the room with you at all times."

"Where am I? Is this a hospital? Have I been ill?"

"I'll? No. You've been in a coma. For a long time. And, yes, we still use that word, although we rarely see the condition. But, no, the facility is not a hospital, although we do have medical staff here—for your protection."

"Protection? Why would I need protection?"

"From your wallet, we know your name is Roger Ames. Is it OK if I call you Roger?"

It was not an answer to my question. I knew I was being put off, but right then I needed him more than he needed me. So, I said, "No, I don't mind. It's my name, but your avoidance of my question does bother me. Why would I need protection and why am I here in this bed? Right now, I don't know why I'm here, or who you are, or what in the hell this is all about?"

He didn't say a word, but I knew he heard me.

"Since you have nothing to say, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to get up and get some clothes and get out of here. I want to go home."

His movement was quick. He shot over to where the bed stood and pushed me back down, forcefully, but not in anger. "You will lie there, Roger, if you don't want to be put in restraints. You may be weak. We're not sure what to expect. Your legs may not support you. We just don't know."

"I'm OK."

"Yes, you may be, but we can't be certain of that. I've had Dr. Ethringer paged. Just relax until he gets here."

"Is this a prison?"

He laughed. "No, of course not."

"Then I want out."

"Understandable, but we'll wait for Dr. Ethringer. We have a lot of explaining to do, and a lot of decisions to make, but he's the doctor, and we'll have to let him guide us through the next few days. Frankly, none of us knows exactly where to



start. Whether you know it or not, you've been with us from the beginning, but we know little about you other than the identification you had in your wallet when you were picked up."

"From the beginning of what? I've never seen you before. I've never been here before. This is not my home and you are not part of my family."

"That much is true. We are not members of your family. But, I am not a stranger to you, am I?"

"Oh, yes you are," I said, but in the back of my mind I knew that wasn't altogether true.

He looked at me straight-on, but didn't say a word.

Finally I said, "Well, I do seem to know you. I've seen you somewhere before, maybe. I just don't know where."

There was the faint trace of a smile on his face when he said, "Well, Roger, you know me in perhaps what you may think of as a strange way. I've been assigned to your case for the last ten years. I've been here with you, on a six-hour shift, all through that time. Yes, you may have seen me, or been aware of me. Believe me, we are not strangers. In many ways, I know you better than you know me."

Assigned to my case were the words he used. My case? What did that mean? Those two words bugged me, so I said it out loud. "My case? What does that mean?"

I didn't get an answer.

As I asked the question, a short, white-headed man came barreling through the door. He looked to be about fifty, and was solidly built. He charged into the room so fast I wondered if he could get his brakes on before he plowed into my bed.

"Well," he said, "it looks like the sleeping beauty has awakened."

Before I could react to his breakneck entrance, he pushed me back onto the bed, stethoscope out, and he said all the standard words. You know the routine... "just breath normally," and as he moved that instrument around my chest, he muttered a few quick things to the younger man who stood there, pad and pencil ready.

## A Ladder

I have no idea what he said. Medical professionals speak in tongues or Arabic or something they learn in medical school. I can never understand them. But I was being ignored. I was a specimen.

Yes, I was beginning to get irritated. I'd had enough. I sat up in bed only to be pushed back down once again. Strong hand. A firm push. And the hand stayed there.

The older man said. "Don't try that again. When we have determined your abilities, you can move, but until then it's the bed for you. You'll be up and around in a day or two I feel sure, but for now, you will do it our way. You're alive because of our care. Cooperate. Life will be easier for you and for us."

That strong hand was still in the middle of my chest, still holding my back firmly against the bed. I knew he meant what he said

There were two of them and probably more somewhere outside the room, so my common sense said I couldn't bully my way out of this—at least not yet. Maybe I had been on that bed for more time than I knew. Maybe I couldn't run—or even walk—out of there. So I changed tactics.

"Look," I said, "you guys are not being fair to me. You seem to know a lot about me and I know nothing about you. I need some answers."

"Of course you do," Dr. Ethringer said. His hand let up slightly on the pressure to my chest. "And you'll get answers. It's a question of what do we really know and where do I start? You're going to think we've all lost our minds and you're the only sane one here."

And then he was gone again. He seemed lost in his own thoughts. It was almost as if he weren't standing at my side with a hand on my chest. "Eighty-two years. Four generations..."

His voice seemed to trail off, or maybe the words were never formed.

For a time there it was as if we were all suspended in space. The young guy hadn't really moved much since Dr. Ethringer got there, and Ethringer seemed lost.



It was up to me.

So, I said it loud and clear. I wanted something to jerk this situation back into some kind of common sense.

“Your words, Doc, either you’re crazy or I am. It’s the worst damned dream I’ve ever had. Stay in bed! Cooperate! Eighty-two years! What in the hell am I supposed to think? This really could be a nut house.”

The young guy was first to move, although he didn’t say a word. It was just a step backward, as though he didn’t want to be any part of the action here. And then the doctor seemed to come back, like he was with it. He gave me a final shove back on the bed.

He said, “Get me a chair, Tim. This young man does need an explanation, even if I’m not sure where to start.”

Better. Much better. We were getting somewhere.

I watched as Tim found a chair and I watched as Dr. Ethringer eased his body into it. With his hands covering both eyes, I heard him say, “Where to start, where to start?”

Well, hell, that seemed obvious to me, so I just said it out loud, “Everything has a beginning. Why not start there.”

The hands came off. His eyes were riveted on mine. His body stiffened, and he was once again fully in charge. He glared at me. This old guy was someone who didn’t like to be questioned.

I’ll never forget those words. They said a lot and they said nothing.

I heard him say, “Eighty-two years ago, Sonny, something happened. We don’t know what it was. We think most of the world was wiped out. We are—and you are—what’s left of it. That was the beginning, smart-ass, but it’s not all you will want to know now, is it?”

He got out of the chair, gave me one hard look, and then turned and walked out of the room.

## Chapter Two

# THE NUT SHELL

I saw him pass through the door and then I saw him swing around and come right back in. The anger was gone. He stood there for maybe a minute just looking down at me and then he said, "You were a smart-ass, and I was little better in letting you get under my skin."

He was right about the smart-ass part, and maybe he deserved an apology from me.

He didn't get it.

I knew what I should do, but sometimes we have a kind of strange pride that just makes us look even more like a bubble-head. I had that kind of a feeling right then. I just wasn't going to say a word. Screw him and his stethoscope.

There was no sign of his anger returning, even though I had just been even more of a smart-ass.

But, he won the battle. His balance and his authority were back in full sight. I was simply ignored.

In that calm voice that had irritated me so much since he came charging into the room, he said, "I'll tell you what we know, and you can make of it what you will. Whatever else we are here on this coast, you are now in a different world. Keep that point in mind. It will help you maintain perhaps a little more balance than you are showing right now."

"What you called freedom in the world you left behind is a far cry from what we have developed over those eighty-two years."

He settled into the office chair that Tim had wheeled in from the other room. He leaned it all the way back and started

talking. Half the time his eyes were closed, but one thing was apparent to me: He was talking and I could listen or not listen. He was indifferent to me. What he had to say was what he was going to say, and that would be it.

My common sense returned about then, and I started to listen.

“When it happened those long years ago, no one saw it coming or felt a thing. When it was over, when they each came back into consciousness, memories were intact, but memories only of what had been before it happened. The actual event, and that’s what we call it even today, The Event, was blotted out. None of them, not a single one, could recall the onset of it or the end of it.”

He closed his eyes again and I heard a little whoosh of air as he started to relax. It was almost as though he felt he was through with the hard part of the explanation.

Oh, but he couldn’t be through. That couldn’t be it for me. It wasn’t even a good beginning. What he had said opened my mind to a thousand questions, none of which I could ask because I was being ignored. He was talking to the room. I could listen or not listen. I was not a factor.

“At that time, this strip of beach—this spared acre—had the only life we were sure of in the whole world. There may have been other pockets of life. We didn’t know and we don’t know today. It was at that moment though that we became a primitive society. Nothing worked. There was no power. Phones were dead. Cars, even with gasoline, would not start.

“Our Elders, what was left of the world we knew, were a motley crew indeed. They numbered about 25,000 souls according to our recorded history. You have to keep in mind, our history begins only eighty-two years ago. The rest of it, everything before The Event is fascinating as all of ancient history is, but of little value to those who survived.”

Oh, how I wanted to ask questions. Every word he uttered brought a mind-shattering rush of confusion. That reaction was so strong that I finally dared to try to ask about my own

## A Ladder

family. I was ignored completely. Dr. Ethringer continued with his narrative as though I wasn't there.

"Few of those survivors had any idea of how to cope without ready-made everything—everything, including food. There was panic and looting, and hopelessness. Yes, and praying.

"Fortunately, among this ragtag cauldron of humanity was our founder, John Emery. He was a farmer, a woodsman and a hunter. A man of uncommon common sense. He could see the hysteria, the chaos and the utter uselessness that was building at an ever increasing pace.

"Emery was a man of commanding presence with a voice like a bullhorn. He mounted a stump and started talking. 'Hold on,' he said, 'all of you, This is a setback, but it's not the end of the world. We will learn to cope with what we have, we will make a new life for all of us.'

"He had the attention of a dozen or so, but as he continued, that dozen grew majestically. 'Yes, the power is gone; yes, our world has been turned upside down,' he continued, 'but we have our lives, we have our faith, we have each other, and we have shelter. The houses still stand.'"

Dr. Ethringer looked past me and out the window. "In times of crisis," he said, "the weak will always go to the strong like grains of metal to a powerful magnet. We are fortunate to have had a man of character in Emery. We could have had a scoundrel. What we have here today is a monument to our founder, John Emery."

With the last sentence, he came out of the chair in one upward motion and started for the door. Then, for the first time, he seemed to acknowledge Tim and me. It was just a nod, but it was acknowledgment.

"Perhaps we'll talk again," he said. "Perhaps not."

And he walked out of the room, just as he had done before, but this time he didn't come back.

For the first time, Tim spoke. "Well, buddy-boy, you almost ripped it with Dr. Ethringer. I hope not, but we'll see. He's the head of the team. Bad move."



## Chapter Three

### **FENCE MENDING**

As the days passed, I saw nothing of Ethringer, not even a passage in the hallway. I did learn a good deal more about the routine in the place I was in. Tim had said something about being with me on a six-hour shift for the past ten years. That became apparent to me in short order, that was the routine. There was Tim, of course, and three others, from six to twelve, from twelve to six and so on for the full day.

I hadn't messed it up with Tim as much as I had messed it up with Ethringer, but it really hadn't been a good beginning with him either. But, as the days passed, I began to look forward to the time periods with Tim because he seemed very open and easy with the facts of my existence and with the place where I now resided, like it or not.

Second to Tim, I liked Eleanor. She was a beautiful girl, not in the pretty sense of the word, but she seemed to radiate a well-being, a zest, a stamina that was a delight. She was as capable as the other three in seeing to it that I was up and around, that I was showered, and that I got to all my sessions on time. The other two were OK, but less communicative.

Those sessions that comprised the routine of my days back then were of two distinct types. One of them I called brain-picking—digging into what my life was like before The Event, right down to the intimate details. The other sessions were strictly physical. I suppose it would be called physical therapy, although I had never had occasion to really know what physical therapy was. It was exercises, both physical and mental.

## A Ladder

And, yes, they were right about the wobbly legs, and other parts of my body that didn't work quite the way I felt they should. Those muscles all got better with each passing day. The routine was rigorous. With each session, walking seemed easier, although I tired more quickly than I thought I should. My upper body began to have more strength.

That part was good. I felt better after each of the exercise sessions. I knew I needed to have complete control and good strength whenever I had the opportunity to shuck this place. That was my plan. I meant to leave as soon as I was able, but I knew I'd need all my faculties. It wouldn't be easy. One of them—one of the guardians or corpsmen or whatever they were called—was with me at all times.

In the early days, though, a large part of my time was spent in bed or in a wheelchair. I soon realized that my big talk of walking out of there was something I was not quite ready for, at least not yet.

While Tim assured me all of my muscles had been exercised on a daily basis for all the years they claimed I was in a coma-like state, he did so with a silly smile that told me he was saying more than those words.

And, yes, now I was able to live a fairly normal life—at least a normal routine. What wasn't normal was that I had no freedom, none at all. Someone was there, just outside the bathroom door, or inside, whether it was the shower or the more personal aspects of a bathroom.

Eleanor was a little more thoughtful of my privacy than the men, but I had the impression she was humoring me. I tried to be casual, and not to be too obvious as I watched her move in the room, but that wasn't easy for me. Her dress might have been called indecent back in my old hometown. She wore the same kind of loose tunic that the men wore. It left little to the imagination and sometimes made much of it.

With the skimpy tunics, I had to admit all my guardians looked healthy, happy and trim. Tim said being physically fit was a key part of their culture. From his earliest memory, the

aim for the community was to be fit and stay well. The key to staying well, according to The Elders, was hard work.

Everyone, bar none, had physical labor to perform. Labor was a part of their daily life, so that everyone had a part in maintaining the best possible life for everyone else who lived on that part of the Coast, in the world as they knew it. What others did—if there were others out there somewhere who survived The Event—was an unanswered question.

I thought a lot about that. It seemed to me that “out there somewhere” was beyond my ken. No exploring? Not in eighty-two years? Why not? Why wouldn’t you know of others? Why wouldn’t your natural curiosity demand a search?

It bugged me enough that one day I said, “It seems to me that if I had been living here during those eighty-two years, somewhere along the way I’d have wanted to form a party and go out there—out there beyond whatever you consider the boundaries—just to find out if there were others. But none of you did. Why? That just baffles me.”

“Maybe you would have and maybe you wouldn’t,” Tim said. “It’s easy to look back and pick flaws. If you try to put yourself in their state of mind, you might be less cocksure of what you would have or would not have done. Emery was one of the few who wasn’t on the verge of hysteria. He had to calm the craziness and lead the way from chaos.”

“Maybe that would be reason enough at the beginning, but later, that’s what I think I would have done,” I said.

“Sure you would,” he said. “You’d have fired up that little old wheelchair and plunged out there into the unknown, through the dead bodies, until you reached another little island of hysteria. You’re an armchair hero, you are.”

To a degree, the air came out of my balloon. In honesty, I had no idea of what I might have done right after The Event or later. Maybe I’d have had the courage to go on such an adventure after the carrion had picked the bones clean. Maybe not.

“You have to remember,” Tim said, “Emery had to spend those first days leading a people back to sanity, and then

## A Ladder

finding a way to help them move forward. By dint of his strong personality, he did that, and within the first week he had formed a Council of five men to help start the community we have today.

“That Council set up the basic rules that we still go by. The health and well-being of the people, the Council determined, would be the first consideration. Second would be the sharing of labor and the sharing of wealth, although there was no money. It was more of a barter system.”

“A commune.”

“Yes, a commune, you could call it that. But, you see, Emery and the Council had been spared from The Event, just as you were, so they knew that the word—the whole idea of a commune—had more than a few ugly connotations, so that specific word was never used. Their memories of what was back then, before The Event, were sharp and clear, just as yours is. We can say the word now, because it is not a memory of the people of today, four generations later. But, it's true, those early survivors were ready to support each other—each of them supporting the other—but the Council knew it couldn't be called a commune.”

“But it was a commune.”

“Yes, by another name. You have to look at it this way, Roger. With that limited number of people, and with the scope of the problems that they all faced back then, and with the genuine need for some sort of order, the choices were few. Our early records shows the word 'family' was used often, as were the words 'fair share.'”

I had to say it. I knew it might anger Tim, but I can't always keep my mouth zipped. “To me, that's lying,” I said, “even if it's lying by omission. The politicians that I remember did that same kind of word-dance with a good deal of skill. When that didn't work, they just renamed it, glossed over it, called it something else.”

“Sometimes you have to do what you have to do to get things done.”



“Then, Timothy,” I said, “you haven’t changed much in eighty-two years.”

I could see him bristle. “When you recover your full strength, buddy-boy, when you are pulling your own weight around here, run for Council. Change things, but right now I’m trying to put the world you live in into some kind of perspective. If you don’t know the history, how can you sit there being the judge?”

But, fortunate for me, he didn’t stay angry long. Whether or not he was emulating Ethringer, he paused for a few seconds, and I could see the muscles in front of his ears relax.

“All right,” he said, “we’ll get back to the point I was trying to make. There is one big difference between how you lived back then and what you can expect here with us now. And, yes, we know a good deal about what life was like before The Event. We have a treasure trove of books, housed right here in this complex, a complex they tell us that was a state university.”

He stopped right there. He wanted that much to sink into my feisty brain before he continued.

“We are an institute that makes a study of what was so that we can make what we now have better. I am a student of your culture, and, whether you know it or not, you are our only real-life specimen of what was. That’s why, from the first day you were found, you have had special treatment.”

I didn’t care that much for the word. A “specimen,” a blob under a microscope, something to be dissected to find what made it tick? Maybe that idea shouldn’t have annoyed me, but the connotation did. But, the good part was, now I knew what I didn’t know before. I really was a specimen. I was a link to the past, their only link. That was the reason for all the prying, the pick-pick-pick that they all did, even Eleanor.

This time I held my tongue. Common sense told me I needed to hear it all.

Tim seemed not to notice my annoyance.

He went on. “There was a third aspect to those early talks that really goes to the heart of it. All six of the men in that Council had lived in the world before The Event and all six of

## A Ladder

them were in agreement that if they had to start a life over with nothing but the rudiments, why not start it over without the burdens—the greed, rancor, jealousy, the blame, and the other illnesses of their earlier days.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “Who wouldn’t? It would be Eden. It would be El Dorado, President Reagan’s ‘shining city on the hill.’”

Tim ignored me. “The Council agreed that all the talk before The Event about equality amounted to political pandering. It was talk, it was sweet music. It never happened, and it was never going to happen. But, we do know what happened back then in the early days of the Council. Meticulous records were kept. Those early documents, too, are housed here in this complex.

“There would be equality, genuine equality. That was one of the keystones of the new world that was being formed. Every citizen would approach the Council as a single, undivided entity. There may be individual differences, but not dividing differences. While the strength of men and women are not the same, this would not in any way disqualify a woman in the eyes of the Council. Why should it? There were differences in strength among the men, and it is overlooked. We were people, all of us, and none of the nuances should ever be allowed to modify that basic factor. The work I do is the same in every respect as the work Eleanor does, and her responsibilities are the same. She is not shielded in any way, and I, because I am a male, am not favored in any way. Eleanor, and all the other women here, are expected to pull on the oar in the same way I do, and when the rewards are meted out, the shares will be the same.”

That kind of equality had been one of my dreams for what seemed like forever, but in my twenty-nine years that dream of equality never happened—not even close. It’s true, we couldn’t do it, but Tim’s put-down was too much, so the rubbem-the-wrong-way Roger and his big mouth came to the fore right there. I said, “You think you can do that? We couldn’t.”

“We are doing it,” Tim said. “We have been doing it for four generations. Wait until you are released from here and take part in your new life. You’ll see. And it’s not the only equality we’ve brought about and kept. We got rid of the biggest bugaboo of all, the sexual misconceptions that you guys had back then—misconceptions that created suicides, murders and all kinds of mayhem—even wars. Emery, and that early Council, while they were formulating the guidelines that were meant to lead us forward as a group, decided to take on the biggest one of the lot: social and sexual equality.”

“Meaning exactly what? That’s opening a very large can of worms.”

“I knew you’d say that, or something like that,” Tim said. “I knew exactly what my assignment was for my shift, and I intend to get it done, whatever you say. Yes, I could see you digging in your heels, and I could only imagine what it would be when I got to the parts that you really might object to, based on your own past history.”

“Where are you going with this, Tim?” I said, “all this suicide, murders and wars stuff. I don’t like the sound of it. Let’s go back to the early days with John Emery. At least that sounded practical.”

“We are talking about the early days, buddy-boy, and, I don’t want to be blunt, but your world is gone, however perfect or imperfect it was. You live in our world now.”

With his use of ‘buddy-boy,’ I knew I’d pushed it as far as I’d better go, at least for now. He wasn’t angry, but I could see he was not going to tolerate any more of my questions. He had a job to do on his shift, and he intended to do it.”

I held my hands up in surrender.

“Yes, Roger,” he said, “we all knew it would be a jolt for you since we are all students of the long period before The Event. Nevertheless, the whole team, including Dr. Ethringer, was of the opinion that you really couldn’t begin to fit in until you fully understood the concept. It fell my lot to do the preliminary explanation because the team felt that the two of us

## A Ladder

were about the same age and that you tended to be closer to me than to some of the others.” He stopped, and he gave me that knowing smile again when he said, “Well, I’d say, with the exception of Eleanor. She gets a little teasing about you, when we are all in the rec room.”

I’d never consciously thought of it before, but I realized he was right about Eleanor. There was something special about her—not just her good looks, but those little things that are almost so ephemeral that you don’t even realize they are there. I liked the way she touched me, even though it was always casual and a part of the routine we were in. And, I liked the way I felt when she was in the room with me. We were just plain easy with each other. I never felt I had to be on guard with Eleanor, and that was not true of the others, not even Tim.

“Oho,” he said. “I’ve hit on something. I saw that look on your face.”

“She’s a great girl,” I said, “all of you have been very patient, very understanding.”

“Hey, boy, don’t try to con me,” he said. “None of us are in the category with her, at least not right now. And don’t try to steer the conversation. I have a job to do and damned little time left before Hensley’s shift. So, back to the subject.”

He got up from his chair and shifted it around so that he was looking directly into my face. Whatever he had to say, he wanted to say it so that there could be no misunderstanding. He wanted to watch my reaction. And then it came.

“Sexual interaction here,” he said, “is just as free, just as open as all the other freedoms that were a part of our system from the start of our new life after The Event. Emery and the Council wiped out—erased—all the weird concepts and behaviors that your system not only countenanced but encouraged—you believed in them, lived by them, and stood up for them. And by doing so, you ruined many a life. You caused suicides, you caused murders, insanity, lack of esteem, and, yes, as I said, wars—religious wars. And the list goes on with strange



and varied sins—sins, at least in your minds—that are too numerous, and sometimes too stupid, for me to cite.”

He stopped right there. He was still looking me right straight in the eyes. If I reacted, I’m not sure what form it had taken. My brain had gone numb. I thought I knew exactly what I heard and what he meant, but the idea was so overpowering that I doubted my own understanding.

He waited.

“Do you mean there’s no such thing as sexual deviation?”

“Yes, I do,” he said. “I mean every word of it. Those labels are man-made, and they are false and phony. Homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian, transsexual—all of them. Phony, phony, phony. We are all sexual, buddy-boy. You have to get that concept through your head. Sexual. That’s the long and the short of it. It’s the same as eating and drinking—it’s the same as shitting. It’s a normal, human activity and can’t be boxed up without consequences.”

At that moment, Hensley came in. The shift was over.

Tim came out of the chair in one swift motion. He said, “See you tomorrow, Roger. Now you have something to think about.”

## Chapter Four

# THE CONSIDERATIONS

One fact was clear to me, Hensley had heard a part of our conversation—at least Tim’s last few sentences—and I knew the whole team was aware of Tim’s mission for that last session. They all knew it. Hensley didn’t try to hide it.

When he said, “Do you want to talk, Roger?” I gave him a one-word, two-letter answer, and it rang finality.

My mind was in a fog. Tim’s last revelation was a powerhouse. I was certain they were all talking about what Tim said and about me. I was a specimen, all right. Maybe I was being experimented on. Who knows?

My rude refusal didn’t upset my caretaker in the least. He just shrugged his shoulders and said, “You’re due at the pool in thirty minutes, do whatever you need to do before I take you there.”

As he left the room he said, “I’ll be back in plenty of time. Eleanor is just down the hall. Call her if you need anything before I get back.”

My mind just couldn’t grapple with all Tim had said during his last shift. Even with the fog I was in, I kept trying to make sense of it.

If what they said was true, if I truly had been in some kind of a dormant state for the past eighty-two years, I wasn’t aware of it. I didn’t feel anything. This much was a fact: I was awake now in a sterile world I didn’t know. And yet what happened in my yesterlife was clear enough. Hell, I could even tell you

what I had for breakfast, and how bad the traffic was on my way to work. There was nothing wrong with my memory.

The things that Tim had just said—what he finally punched home to me—were against everything I could remember before I ended up at this place.

I grew up in a Christian family. I admit we weren't regular churchgoers, but that was our religion for all my life and, at least to my knowledge, for generations before my day. We had beliefs and we had standards, we had customs and rituals, we were civilized. There were men and there were women. That's how the generations were created, one after the other, through the centuries. It was the natural order of life. Men and women.

That's how it was and how it was supposed to be.

Yes, occasionally, there were deviations, I knew that. There were variations from the norm, but we were no different than the rest of our world where you could find the oddball. In a field of clover, you might find several that had four leaves, or a crazy bird that abandons its nest, or a lioness that will not suckle her cub.

We were human. Perfection was the ideal. It was our task to achieve it.

In the world I knew, deviations were labeled as deviations. And now Tim forcefully claims that those concepts are all wrong—we were all wrong back in the era I came from, back before The Event, millions of us. And these folks are right?

Wait a minute.

Truly, what do I know of the people here? I've never seen anyone other than staff. And what do I know of the ideas that Tim spouted? Nothing, really. I had never seen or talked to a single outside soul. Did I even know they existed?

Or, was I caged in a crazy house where I was simply a part of some kind of weird experiment?

When I tried to make sense of it, I failed. I knew none of the people here, or even if there were other people outside of these

## A Ladder

walls. With the exception of Ethringer and the staff, I had never seen a soul or spoken to anyone.

Was I supposed to abandoned all that I knew to be true and start believing the new rules just to satisfy the Council? Five or six men, not a Deity. My own beliefs had more foundation.

And yet, some of Tim's accusations, as wild as they were, murder and wars and all that mayhem, had found lodging in my brain. In my world—the world I seemed to have left behind—deviates could have a hard time of it, and, yes, I knew from my own experience that there were some who couldn't stand the pressure of living outside the frame. I knew of such suicides. I knew that much to be a fact. I had seen it with my own eyes. And I remembered the suicide of three men out at Mud Lake, three prominent men, who inexplicably ended their lives under the Live Oak trees one moonlit night. That had happened while I was still in high school.

That one accusation Tim had made had some truth to it.

But, the rest of his wild statements might be just that, wild and outrageous, but, I had to concede, suicide was something I had seen—suicide over not fitting into the world I knew, over not fitting into our hard-held standards.

Yes, Tim had a point with that one. Those suicides were wrong and unnecessary, but they did happen. But, the rest of what he tried to force on me was hogwash.

And then I had another nagging thought.

The worst of his statements was that our way of life back before The Event was a cause of war. A cause of wars, he had said, plural. Wars. I had pushed that one to the back of my mind, but the back of my mind had a mind of its own, so here it was jousting at my common sense and demanding to be considered.

But, wars were over power, not social conventions, right? So, I tried once again to shove that one aside, only to have it come roaring back demanding to be considered. Not social conventions it said? Think again.



I'd always had more than a passing interest in the Civil War. Few wars can be whittled down to just one reason, but this is one that came close, at least in my mind. Our country was torn apart because one half of it saw nothing wrong with owning slaves—indeed the economy of that half a nation was based on slaves—while the other half of it was opposed to the inhumanity of oppressing any human being.

Yes, from my history books I knew there were other factors that were involved in the Civil War, but the one ringing truth that prevails—or that prevailed to my twenty-ninth year—was slavery.

A social event—a difference in opinion on one basic precept—did, indeed, cause the worst conflagration in our country's history, with, at times, brother against brother and father against son.

It had nothing directly to do with sexual mores, but it did have to do with power. And it was the power of religion that screamed from the housetops that man should not lie with man. It was an abomination.

My mind was like an incoming tide and I was not happy with the debris that came floating up.

And then Hensley was back.

“Look alive” he said. “Time for the pool. You need to put some tone into those back muscles. Come on. I'm running a little late getting back.”

## Chapter Five

# THE OUTSIDE WORLD

I didn't see Tim again for three more days. I don't know why he wasn't there, but I suspect it was all a part of a deliberate plan. I think they wanted me to be in the kind of turmoil that I was in when his last shift ended. I think I was left to stew in my own juice, maybe because I had been a little rude, or maybe it was so I could sort out some of my own thoughts.

I did ask.

I was told that Tim had been temporarily reassigned. A guy named Waldo took Tim's regular shift. With the mood I was in, Waldo was a guy I didn't know or care to know.

Not fair, but life's not fair, at least not the life I had in this prison without bars. My bright spot was Eleanor. In all the rearranging of schedules, she followed Waldo. She was on the six to midnight shift.

"Good news," she said as she came through the door, "you're doing well enough that we're going outside for my entire shift. Hey, like Cinderella, I have to have my Cinderfella back here by midnight. How does that sound?"

I wasn't sure I heard correctly. "Outside?"

"You got that right, Roger. Outside. We have six hours. We have more than two hours of daylight, so we'll do the town. Then we can have supper and go to my place. And then we can just loll around until I have to bring you back and check you in. No assignments. None. It's all playtime."

"Outside? Away from that damned room? I can't believe it."

“Neither could I,” Eleanor said, “but there it was on the assignment board. The staff knew and I knew that you were rapidly recovering your strength, but, even so, this assignment was a surprise.”

Then she said, “Let’s get you ready. The tunic is OK, but I need to find something heavier for later. With the wind off the ocean, it can get chilly, especially for someone who has been holed up here for eighty-two years.”

That was one of her little jokes, that eighty-two year thing. “You’re an old guy,” Eleanor would say. “Not Methuselah, but edging up there, ripe on the vine.”

While I put on my sandals, Eleanor found jacket that I could wear later, a kind of pea coat, a dark blue number with four buttons.

I had heard her say something about having to “check you in by midnight,” but it didn’t really register until we got to the front of the building, a part of it I had never seen before. The check-out process was serious. She had to show her identification and the authorization from Dr. Ethringer before the doors were unlocked.

When we were outside, and when my eyes got adjusted to the bright sunlight, I said, “Well, that was some kind of a routine we had to go through back there. Locked doors. You even had to show your I.D. Don’t they know you?”

“Yes, some of them do, but I would have had to show the I.D. as a matter of routine. But, yes, today was a little different, more complex, because I was taking you out of the building. Yes, old guy, you did complicate it today.”

“I don’t see why my outside visit would make that much of a difference. What’s the big deal?”

Eleanor gave me a long, hard look.

“Sometimes you baffle me, Roger. You are bright enough, intelligent, even sassy, and yet, at times you sound so naive that I wonder if you have bat brains. Let me say it one more time, although in one way or another you’ve heard all this before I know.”

She took a deep breath and then began again.

“You are considered to be one of our national treasures, Roger. You are our only real live key to what existed before The Event, now that our founders are long gone. We have the books from your world that were left undamaged right here in this guarded facility, and we have the written records of our founders. Great for reference both of them, but they are only books.

“That’s why you have been babied, pandered to, exercised, fed intravenously when required, just to keep you alive. It was their theory way back then, that you might be of value should we managed to bring you back to good health. Dr. Ethringer and the men who went before him have worked long and hard for the day that we have now seen. You are alive and we are getting bits and pieces of information that we could only get through your experience, firsthand knowledge of the past, because you were there, you lived it”

In a way, I was being chided—no, more than chided. I was being talked down to as though I were a child. It was something Tim had done too many times, and here it was from Eleanor. Yes, I’d heard some of this palaver before, but I didn’t know what part to believe or even if I could to believe any of it. I didn’t know what was real and what was not, although most of the whole ordeal since I remembered opening my eyes seemed like a complete lack of reality—a dream, but not a good dream.

“You guys never look at it from my side,” I said. “This whole damned thing doesn’t feel real, doesn’t sound real, and may not be real. I have only your word for where I am and what I am. I just don’t know. I feel like a damned grasshopper stuck on the board with a pin. I’m an experiment, an exhibit.”

Eleanor laid her hand gently on my arm. “Roger,” she said, “I’m sorry. You are right. None of us thought about how you might feel coming out of this. We were all so excited that you were here with us. I’m sure now that we must have seemed thoughtless. We just wanted to be able to talk with you. There could be so much we could learn from you.”



What a change. Eleanor was back to being the girl who had been the biggest help to me all through this unreal ordeal, the beautiful girl who understood, had empathy for the stranger who—at least in his eyes—had been thrust into their midst.

“Hey,” she said, “this is supposed to be our fun time. I’m your guide into the big wonderful world outside that room you’ve been in. Let’s go down the street and let’s just enjoy being with each other.”

And she took my hand and said, “Come on, old guy. I’ll show you my city.”

Then truly, for the first time, I saw what it was like being outside in my new world. The campus was trim and neat in the evening shadows. The atmosphere had changed. We walked hand-in-hand past the Quad and toward the street.

And it was a shock.

Clean wide streets, and not a car in sight. Far down the road, I could see a cart, but the rest of it was just people—people walking or jogging. They were all going about their business, without paying the slightest attention to the two of us.

That was not what I expected, either.

For my entire life, no one had given me a second glance, but now I was the center of attention. I was beginning to believe the world revolved around me. But, but here on the street—outside for the first time—these folks didn’t bother to look at me at all. I was nobody, just another guy, and I certainly was not looked upon as a national treasure.

In a few seconds I had a more logical thought: Why should I be anything special? The two of us seemed to blend in with the street traffic. We were dressed in much the same way as they were. We were just two other people on a busy street.

Yes, in a way it was a let down. Maybe I had gotten used to special handling and being catered to, even if I railed against being holed up and guarded day and night.

The words “spoiled brat” came to mind.

Enough of that. Now was time to enjoy the freedom of the loss of four walls.

The overriding impression of my new-found freedom was the cleanliness of the part of town that I could see from where we stood. From the facades of the building, to the street and even to the gullies it was clean. There were no bits of trash collecting in the crevices, no mildew under the awnings, no cans or bottles. The whole place looked freshly scrubbed.

Eleanor gave my hand a little squeeze and she said, "OK. You've looked around long enough. Let's get out there in the thick of it, let's meld in with the crowd, rub shoulders with them, so you'll know you're on the outside. Come on, Roger."

And that's what we did.

It was a wonderful feeling, an exhilarating feeling, to be with people who weren't my guardians. People who were on their way to somewhere and who didn't really give a damn about me.

In one quick trip we did it all. We walked on the beach, we played jump-rope with some kids in the park and we had a kind of coffee at a little outdoor cafe. Yes, it was the same kind of coffee substitute that I had back at my prison, but, here, in the open air it had been jazzed up, or maybe I'm the one who was jazzed up.

As the evening shadows started to close in, we stopped at a little restaurant, a neighborhood place, where everyone knew Eleanor. Even there I created no stir. When people stopped by, she simply introduced me as a friend, Roger Ames.

When the meal was over, Eleanor paid the tab. I didn't have a dime. I didn't even have my wallet or I.D. The prison had all that, but I doubt any of it would have done me any good. I didn't even know what kind of money they used.

I must have squirmed. She thought my embarrassment was funny "It's my pleasure," she said. "You're my date. Let's go home." She took my hand and led me to the street.

It was a short walk, but it gave me time to think about where I might be going. "Home," she had said. What might that be? I found out soon enough.

It was a corner house, something that might have been in style in the days of “Gone With the Wind,” an old movie my mother had on tape.

When she turned onto the walkway, I said, “Wow! You live here?”

“With a lot of other people, yes,” she said. “This is home for me, a small apartment, but plenty large enough. I’m not big on housework.”

I could see that the old house had been carefully preserved on the outside, but the interior had been gutted, and it was now a series of small apartments. It was all she needed, a living room of adequate size, a bedroom and bath, and a kind of galley, small but it appeared to be complete.

“I’ve read about all those gadgets you had in your day, Roger, and some of them sound interesting, but I’m not sure they would suit me. Call me spoiled by a more idyllic life. Here it’s early to bed and early to rise. It’s something like what I read about the farmer’s of your day. Our life here—for all of us, farmers or medical technicians—is not the constant stress that abounded back then with all the conveniences you had.”

“Primitive.” I said, “this is all primitive.”

“Yes, that could easily be what you’d think without all the ‘advancement’ you thought you had, the inventions you lived with—all your electric grids that got knocked for a loop with storms, and computers, and cars, and gasoline and smells. Did you smell fumes out there on the street or in the park, or were you smogged in? You were not. We like the fact that the official workday is only six hours, with two months off for personal pursuits. Of course we all share in the maintenance of the world around us, maybe an hour or so a day, but wasn’t that what many of your number was searching for before The Event? Wasn’t that the cry? Clean water, clean air?”

“You got that right, Eleanor, but—and there’s a big but—it is primitive, stripped down, basic living here. You are controlled by the whims of nature, of day and night, of good and bad weather.”

“It’s healthy living, The result is we are living a good thirty years longer.”

I thought of an old joke, so I said, “Living longer, or does it just feel that way.”

She laughed at that little play on words, but she was undeterred. “It’s ‘fess-up time Roger, time for a reality check. Your strength is coming back at a really surprising pace. We’ve all noticed it and Dr. Ethringer can’t believe how well you’re doing. Have you ever asked yourself why?”

Well, I hadn’t, I hadn’t even thought about it. But she had a point. I felt great—strong, clean, relaxed. In what I thought of as ‘my other life,’ I had had a few problems. They were small things, but I still had memories of a sinus congestion that I had had for most of my life, and I had athlete’s foot with smelly gym shoes, and occasions of sleeplessness. Nothing major. I had always believed I had unusually good health. But she was right about now. Maybe the sandals were responsible for my healthy feet, but I had no sinus drain and I slept like the proverbial babe-in-the-woods from early nightfall until dawn.

“You haven’t noticed?”

To avoid answering, I said, “I hadn’t even thought about it.”

“Until now.”

Pushed into a corner, I had to say something. I decided to concede the point.

“Yes, not until now.”

“And I win.”

“If it’s a contest, yes, you win”

Darkness was closing in. There was little light from the two tall windows that faced the street. The pending darkness didn’t seem to bother her at all. By this time, I was beginning to get used to the fact that nightfall meant sleep because they would have me up at dawn with more of the physical therapy stuff.

Conceding the point turned out to be a good thing. The atmosphere was better. The bit of banter between us faded away. Yes, maybe the little lesson she was trying to give me was her “assignment” for her shift. I could never be sure about those things.



They did that to me often, just to get a reaction, and even though I knew what they were doing some of the time, it worked.

If I felt a little tension with my first time out, it seemed to be gone. It grew quiet in the apartment, but from down the street I could hear music—a mandolin from the sound of it—and the melody was light and beautiful, though faint.

And, just to complete the perfection of that moment, a very large moon came peeping up from behind the pine trees across the street. It was almost a full moon. It was just lopsided enough to fit in with the best shift I had ever had with Eleanor.

“Come sit with me, Roger,” she said, “the moon is coming up. You can see it better from the sofa.”

Of course I moved, and it was even nicer when she put her head on my shoulder and settled in along side my body.

But, then it started again.

“Marriage, back in the world you knew, was a 'til-death-do-us-part thing, wasn't it, Roger?”

It rankled. It sounded like her assignment might be back again. Maybe I even spoke too soon when I said, “Is this a part of the session?”

She took the wind right out of my sails when she said, “Yes, it is.”

There was no evasion, no trying to turn my words into something that I hadn't meant.

“Then why not be more direct? If there's a question, say it straight out.”

It was almost as if she didn't hear me. There not only was no reply, but she just moved a little closer to me, and I could hear little hum, almost like a cat purr.

“Don't try funny stuff with me, Eleanor. It's all right with the guys, but I expect more from you.”

Still no reply.

“You're a student here, a student of what you might call ancient history. You've read the books, so you know 'til-death-do-us-part is only a dream, an ideal.”

Even then there was no reply.

“You must still have marriages here. They can’t be perfect. ‘To err is human,’ I know you’ve read that.”

“Not here.”

“Baloney.”

“No, it’s true,” she said. “It’s not easy or fast, but it is a permanent contract. Here, if you live to be a hundred, a license for marriage is the hardest task you’ll ever undertake. It is never taken lightly. From what I’ve read, and from our early survivors of the former life, your idea of marriage was an easy arrangement to make.”

There was a pause. She wanted me to think that one through.

“Whether it was one of those travesty weddings with all the pomp or an elopement, anybody could do it, and just about everybody did. Marriage was the acceptable way to find an outlet for emotions that were going to bubble up and take over however much you tried to sublimate them. It was all pretty damned willy-nilly if you ask me. Here, it has little to do with the joy of personal expression and everything to do with procreation—having children, nurturing children, helping them to grow into happy adults who, themselves, might one day marry.”

“But, you do marry here? Marriage is not a dead issue?”

“Oh, yes,” Eleanor said, “we marry, but we don’t divorce. It’s not a contract to be taken lightly. You are making a permanent arrangement that will not be broken until all children are fully adult. After that, if you wish, the arrangement may continue.”

“But,” I said, “it is a marriage and mistakes are made. As I pointed out, ‘to err is human.’ You know, the passion of the moment.”

“Passion of the moment,” she said, “is a transient thing, and it comes in many forms, and it has nothing to do with rearing children who ought never to have to suffer because their parents let their emotions run amok. That is why you called us licentious one day. Tim told me. He was a little shocked that you were shocked.”

This, too, was a part of her assignment, so she let it hang there.

Then she said, "Of course, we don't know how much you remember of the time before you regained consciousness. You do know, because we told you, that for all those years your body, all of it, was exercised, waiting for the day when you'd be really well, as you are today."

And, there it was again, about my body being exercised. Tim had made the point, and I remember his little smirking smile. Maybe Eleanor was smiling, but I couldn't be sure, not by moonlight.

"Let me put it this way, Roger," Eleanor said. "In our world, the only world we know—the only world that I know—we recognize the fact that we are all human, and that we have human needs, and that repressing them causes problems—problems that, from what I've read, was the bane of mankind, at least in your day. Here we don't lie about or repress our feelings. They are completely natural. Here we have only one rule: No means no. Anything two or more people can agree on is fine, but No mean No."

She didn't say anything for another minute or so, and then she said, "Am I giving you too much too soon?"

There was another of those quiet moments. I truly didn't know what to say. I was having a lot of trouble processing all she said. And, I didn't remember the conversation with Tim, though I don't deny it could have happened. He was the one who kept pressing the emotional and sexual aspects of my new life.

"As you live here with us," she said, "you are going to learn that from our earliest days, we try to live the natural life. That entails every aspect of our emotions. Sexual activity is a part of that natural aspect. We are all sexual, even from our earliest days. You guys back then knew of those sexual feelings, and they are there from one to ninety-one, but, all too often you pretended they didn't exist. Or, worse, you repressed them. Let the steam build up. The result was that one of the big businesses in your world was mental health. You're not going to deny that are you?"

She had me by the nape there.

Not only did we have a lot of mental health problems in our schools, in our homes, our offices and factories, but it appeared to be our growth industry. It was everywhere, and the problem zoomed, growing larger every day, demanding more projects and more funding.

Yes, it was there, but was that because we didn't share the ideas she was helping to promote? I admit these new ideas were all beyond my ken. I'm an accountant—at least I was—so logic prevails with me, and this was not all logic, although some of it was downright sensible.

"We went by the Book," I said.

"Yes, I know," she said. "The Book. The Book in its several forms, even within those of you who called yourselves Christian. The Book, written by men, open to interpretation by men. A wonderful piece of literature. That's the way I see it."

"Hey, can we call this off. It's a fun day, remember? That's what you said."

"OK, Roger. It's off. No more."

But, then I had to take another little prod. "Did you get the assignment done? Have we satisfied the good doctor?"

"You have to needle, don't you? But, yes, the business of my shift is over. And while you get annoyed with us, it's all for your own good. We're only trying to help and we're only trying to learn from you. We want to put a face to the books we have stored here. You're it. You're the face."

But she wasn't through. I'd hit a nerve with the 'good doctor' reference.

"And, Roger, it's not just for us, not just a 'going back into time.' While we are learning, we are trying to help you with a transition. You have to be able to fit in, and to fit in you have to know that this is not the hurly-burly that you knew, or is it the social system you grew up in. You are here and this is now, and that's just the way it is. There's no going back."

It was time for me to draw in my horns. So I said, "Then we'll drop it all, right here and right now. We have another two



hours before I have to be checked in. Let's let this be our time, not Ethringer's time."

"You have a deal, my boy. From now on, I'm your date. And I'll have you in by midnight, or we'll both turn into pumpkins."

I've always been fascinated by the amount of our history and our literature that the staff had read, but, since I talked to Eleanor and Tim more than the others, I was more aware of it with those two. Here she was making a glancing reference to one of our fairy tales. Fairy tales! Surely they were not assigned reading.

I wanted to ask about that, but I knew it would start another round, so I just kept quiet. For her part, Eleanor went into that little galley, and quietly came back with two glasses of wine.

It was a little on the sweet side for me, and potent. It was a wine that seems to run through your veins with every sip, a wine to be reckoned with.

"Is this a good year?"

She laughed. "Any year that produces a good harvest is a good year."

With that comment, she moved in a little closer to me, dropped a hand on my knee and then began moving her fingers northward.

"You know the rule" she said. "You can always say no."

"Is this a part of the assignment?"

"No," she answered, "it's a part of the design."

## Chapter Six

### **The Plot**

Yes, I was freshly showered and back to the jail on time.

My keeper for the next shift was deep in a book when I got to my room. It had been one wonderful night, and being out of doors for the first time was only a small part of it.

This had been a day to remember for more than one reason, although one of the reasons stands out. It was the beginning of what I suppose you'd call the love of my life.

Oh, back before The Event, I had had girl friends and they were close, warm, relationships, and all that that implies, but now I know that's what they were, relationships. Fun and exciting, yes, but relationships. With Eleanor it was different. Nothing furtive or flirty or demanding about it. All the other big deals of my life paled by comparison.

And, yes, I know that this is a familiar theme, one that every lover believes, if only for the duration. But I knew, I was positive, this was not just the flavor of the month with me—or with her.

But, the specter of “the assignment” did hover in the background. I knew for sure I was her big love, but there could also be the other factor—her job—still front and center or, if not glaringly out front, it was at the very least, there in the background at all times.

And, I had reason to think Ethringer may have been a part of it, though I was smart enough not to talk to Eleanor about it.

The work schedule that had made it possible for my first trip outside seemed to have been altered—altered to push us together. I was keenly aware of that.

Then there was another of those alterations in routine. Hensley was moved to the early morning shift and Waldo took his place. That should have given me pause, but I just thought Ethringer was playing God again.

Oh, I'm sure it was Ethringer's tinkering, but, here's how it worked: Waldo took Eleanor's shift from six in the afternoon until midnight. Eleanor was moved to midnight to six in the morning, Hensley was there in the morning, and Tim stayed on his usual shift from noon to six o'clock.

Hey, it was wonderful for me. Eleanor with me from midnight until dawn. I was overjoyed and at the same time just a little put off. In my mind, the good doctor was arranging my life. He was almost like a voyeur. He wanted the liaison between Eleanor and me to continue big time, and he wanted it so much that he made that continuation almost a done thing from the outset by the special hours I had with her.

Was this, at least in his mind, 'an assignment?' Eleanor's new assignment? Another experiment? Or, was it to see as how well Tim's lessons were going? Or, could it be just another part of the physical therapy that I had every day? For truly it was physical and it was therapy.

Did she know? Was she a part of it?

One thing sure, at least in my mind, I was being maneuvered.

Yes, all that waltzed around in the back of my mind, but I'm a practical man, and the more important thing was the wildly physical and almost ethereal time I had with the most wonderful girl I had ever known.

We never discussed her work during our precious time together. She didn't try to pick my brains or teach me about the different life I was settling into.

But, that was not the case with Tim.

## A Ladder

With the new schedule, from noon to six, it was what seemed like a barrage of questions about my life before The Event and statements about how it was going to be now.

He never asked about my relationship with Eleanor, at least not directly, but that did not mean that his interest in the sexual mores of my previous life didn't become the subject, even when the conversation was a great deal more mundane.

There was a time when we were discussing the sports I played in high school. It really began about the rules of the game and it shifted to how I felt about winning.

"You play to win," I said. "That's what makes it exciting."

"Is winning power to you?"

There it was, back to that power thing. A theme Tim fell back on often.

I didn't answer. We'd been all through the sex and war deal. I didn't want to go over it again, especially since part of what he had said was beginning to make sense to me. That made him the winner and me the loser. I didn't like losing.

When he saw I wasn't going to answer, he said, "How did you feel about being in the shower room with all those naked men? Big deal or no big deal?"

"No big deal. That was what happened after the game. You got cleaned up and dressed."

"When all the soap and lather was washed off, did you check the other guys out?"

Again, I said nothing. I didn't want this to go on and on.

"Are you going to tell me by saying nothing at all, that the shower room thing was somehow a bigger deal than just cleaning up and dressing?"

I sizzled with that one.

In a loud, clear voice I said, "What I am going to tell you, Timothy, is that every guy in that shower room and every other shower room in the state checked the other guys out. We all thought we might have been overlooked by God, so we wanted to be sure where we stood in the order of things and, if you want



to know what I think, I think that that is true today, right here in Perfectville, just as it was then. It's natural."

"Whoa," Tim said. "I've touched another nerve here. But, let me answer your outburst—an outburst, I might add, which is in itself an answer. Yes, in your perverted world, bodies were covered at all costs. Sometimes I wonder why you didn't cover more of the bare skin with gloves and hoods. In your repressed world, curiosity must have been rampant, so that when you had a 'socially acceptable' opportunity to see how you stacked up with the other guys, checking-out did happen, as you say, in the shower room and in all shower rooms."

He did it again.

There was logic in what he said. Maybe our nudist colonies were more natural even if they were not socially acceptable. My idea of a nudist's behavior certainly would be more accepting than my mother's. She wasn't big on going naked. In her world I am sure, all the same human needs existed, hidden perhaps, and, no doubt satisfied, but covered with a different patina, a different set of social customs.

"But, buddy-boy, you are wrong about Perfectville," Tim said. "We are—men and women, boys and girls—very open about our bodies. We've all seen each other, with clothes and without clothes, all of our lives, from childhood on. It's no big deal. Clothing is worn for sanitary reasons and for warmth. When winter comes, we will wear more, depending on the day. That's it. And, yes, we do check each other out, but not to see if I'm bigger than you, not to see my ranking among men, but to find a partner for an hour, or a day, or for a lifetime. We are looking for beauty. That's one of the reasons we are such sticklers for good health. Good health is a good body. You are on display all the time. You never know when something that interest you will come along, so you want to be ready for it. And, just so you know, so you don't have to be curious, you are bigger than I am, but that doesn't matter. I have a package to sell, it's all of me, and I look good, feel good, and I'm active."

## A Ladder

And, there it was again, that little funny smile when he said, "...you are bigger than I am."

It was an echo from another session. What had it been? I seem to remember that it was something about the exercises that I had had before I came out of the coma.

"Sexual desires are not unlike all other natural bodily functions." Tim said. "They are there, they are real, and they need to be satisfied. When you're hungry, you eat. It's as simple as that. And, just the same as it is with being hungry and finding food, there are things you like to eat, and things you don't want at all. Some people don't like broccoli. Sexual expression is just like a category of food, like ice cream. That's why it comes in so many flavors."

After that he seemed to clam up. It was as though, "That was my assignment for today, and it's done. Roger listened. Now he has to think."

## Chapter Eight

### **THE PLAN**

I had Waldo again for the next shift, and he spent his time with his nose in a book studying. He barely grunted something about an exam. If he even knew about the previous session and Tim's assignment, he didn't show it. The same was true when Eleanor come on duty at midnight.

Until I saw Tim at noon the next day, the world was placid. But by that time I had worked out a few things in my mind, and I had had a good number of hours to let all he said sink in. More than that, I had a few questions of my own.

So, when midnight finally rolled around and Eleanor came on duty, I had played and replayed my session with Tim over and over. I had boiled the whole session down to one thought, but I wasn't sure I was happy with the short version of it.

I dropped all memory of that conversation the moment she came through the door. Who would let thoughts of a possibly invented history even enter his mind when he had a girl like Eleanor at his side?

After she filled out the routine forms for the shift, she took off her tunic and climbed into bed with me.

Slow and easy seemed to be the theme. We responded to each other as though we were of one mind and one body. The world could have ended and we would not have noticed or cared. My thoughts were of Eleanor and nothing else mattered. Nothing.

That night resulted in only one thought, and it was far from either Tim or Ethringer. I knew right then I wanted to marry

Eleanor, I wanted to share her little apartment, and while I didn't expect to get out of the prison I was in until I had come to accept the new mores, this was a girl I needed in my life, a girl that was worth gutting a few principles for.

Marriage was in my mind, full scale, but I didn't mention it—or even hint at it—to Eleanor. I still remembered the theme of her conversation with me about how it was a contract, a contract with the state, with the people. Maybe she didn't use these exact words, but she clearly said, 'Marriage is not for you or your spouse, it's for the children.' She said this or a version of it for a little too long to suit me. It was like she was putting me off. I didn't like hearing it.

But, yes, I am sure it was her assignment for that session just like it has been for Tim's several session.

I wanted to shout, "Hey, I got it, guys: Any kind of sexual expression is easy here, but marriage is the hardest job you'll ever apply for. Any two applying for a marriage license have to prove themselves ready for real commitment or don't even bother to apply. Marriage is not for everyone."

Yes, that was the gist of it, but I'm not someone to be put off by words. They'll see.

My trip outside that morning was with Hensley again. Not my choice, but maybe I'm more to blame than he is. He hadn't snitched on me. We went to the beach on that bright, cloudless day. There was a slight chill to the air, but it wasn't enough to call for extra clothing. The swimmers were mostly nude, but clothing was optional.

The fresh air cleared my mind of trivia. So far in this new life, I had been aimless. Doing nothing to help myself or to help them. I'm sure I must have seemed annoyed, rude, uncooperative, even smart-assed. I had just flipped a new leaf. Now I had a goal. I wanted to marry. Maybe I could bend a little, maybe I could listen a little better.

The test was not long in coming.

Tim was five minutes early for his session. Did this mean he was ready to swat me around again? If so, he was in for a



surprise. He didn't know it, but now I had an aim, a reason for living, a girl I loved.

Tim wasted no time on preliminaries. Like a shot from a pop gun he said, "Well, how does it feel to know that your life was saved by, and your first new-life experience was by, a second-class citizen, a non-normal male, by a homosexual?"

Yes, it was hard to stick with my self-imposed plan of being more cooperative. What he said was brutal. I was beginning to understand a little of their standards, but they—or at least Tim—didn't give a damn about mine.

I just let that one hang in the air while I got back my composure.

And, to his credit, Tim seemed almost embarrassed by what he said and by my reaction.

Finally he said, "Sorry, buddy-boy, you didn't deserve that."

My reaction was swift. "You're damned right I didn't."

"What I said was true," Tim said, "but I should not have bludgeoned you. I am truly sorry. I keep forgetting that you had twenty-nine years of brainwashing."

"Apology accepted," I said, but I'm not really sure I meant it. Politeness was another one of those brainwashed things that that had been ingrained in me. You say those things because they are expected. It says you're civilized. You just say the words, and hope the rest of the bad feeling will go away.

"Let's start again," Tim said. "My assignment is to continue the story of those your early years with us, and, yes, as promised, I did bring copies of those old records so you could read them at your own pace."

"Let me cut this short, Tim" I said. "I'll read what you brought later, but I'd like to do a little recap of what you've been trying to beat into me for some time now. You can let me know if I have it right."

This was a turn he didn't expect. I saw a look flash across his face. It was surprise, anger, and understanding all in one fell swoop. This guy was a pro. I could see why Ethringer thought he was the one to carry the burden of the rebirth of me.

## A Ladder

He said, "Go, boy. Recap it for me and we'll work out the kinks together."

His tenseness was gone. He kind of slumped back into his chair, waiting for me to start.

Now, it was put-up-or-shut-up time, and I hadn't thought it through well enough. I just wasn't sure where to start. So I bumbled along until I got it going.

After a couple of limp attempts, I finally hit a reasonable approach. "Let's start with the here and now. I am here, and there's no going back. My life will have to fit into what is and not some notion I brought stored in the back of my memory somewhere."

"Right," Tim said.

"And here's what you've been saying to me. This is a free nation, unfettered by a lot of preconceived, man-made notions of right and wrong."

"You have been listening, buddy-boy."

"The people here are not tagged or labeled in any way because we are all different, even close kin. And that difference is celebrated rather than contained. So, anything goes."

"Well, now," Tim said. "You make it sound like something it's not. It's not some kind of a continuous wild sexual orgy."

"But," I said, "if that were to occur, no one would be under arrest."

"That's right. If it was an agreeable thing for all concerned, if no one was being hurt by it, then it would be a natural expression. No one would care. No one should care. It would be the business of those involved, and your opinion as to the right or wrong of it would not matter. No group of people or single person is appointed to rule the world. No one has the right to decide what is right or proper for another person or another group."

And then, as though I might not be smart enough to understand what he was saying, he leaned in a little toward me and said, "Your personal opinions matter only as they concern

your life. The choice is always yours in such matters. If you don't want to be involved in group activity or a twosome, just say no. The big rule is 'No means No.'

"The public be damned."

"This has nothing to do with the public. It's a person's right to a very natural event—an event, I might add, that either gets satisfied or all hell breaks loose. Do you prefer suicides for people who just don't fit a pattern, or do you want to see murders or crazies because someone can't cope with the box they've been force into? That's what you had with your man-made sins."

He was in the swing of it, and I was trying to make points, so I just let him roll on.

"What we have is a natural approach to life," he said, "an understanding that we are all different. We are free to decide what we wear, what we eat, how we dress—or undress. Individualism is understood—it is a reality. We are all free to follow all natural instincts. That's what is being celebrated here."

"Got it," I said, "or at least I'm beginning to get it. Here the most powerful thing in life is sexual expression, whatever that may be for each individual."

"Almost," Tim said. "You are still still thinking, still filtering everything through the hellfire and damnation of that old world, the one you grew up in. The result is that you tinge a very natural human behavior with a thin layer of reprobation. You make it sound dirty—dirty in your sense of the word, as in dirty jokes, leering, and sniggering. You are turning it into something you are halfway ashamed of doing, saying, or thinking. You make a beautiful part of life into something it is not."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are, whether or not you are aware of it. You just said, '...some kind of a wild orgy,' and you followed that with something about 'the public be damned,' and sex being 'the most powerful thing in life.'"

"Well, that's what I'm hearing."

"It's not what I'm saying, buddy-boy, so let me try one more time. The sexual aspects of your life and mine are as

## A Ladder

normal and natural as our need for sleep and food, and, as I said once before, shitting. These are all needs that must be met. When they are seriously interfered with, all hell breaks loose. My sleep patterns are my own—not like yours or not like the man down the street. How I eat, what I eat and when I eat it, those are things that are my own. And if, if by law or by custom, they are forced into patterns that are alien to me, the results can be dire. The sexual part of your life or of mine, like the eating and sleeping, is an individual thing. One size does not fit all. There is a wide range, a very wide range. Where you fit into that picture is as individual as your thumb print, and you have no more control over it than you do your thumb print.”

“Maybe I made a bad choice of words.”

“Well, maybe. And maybe it was just a hangover from your past.”

“You don’t have tags.”

“We don’t condemn. We don’t categorize. We honor the natural inclination of the individual. Those feelings are not a choice anyone makes—not mine, not yours or not his. It’s what we are on that day at that hour—and those behaviors change throughout life. What you were yesterday or last week is not necessarily what you are today. We don’t care what you do or how you do it as long as it’s fulfilling. If it’s your bag, you can be a Handy-Andy all your life, or you can get it on with one, two, or three, or you can stay with your own sex or mix it up. I seriously doubt that there are any of us who have not had desires for men, women and children at some time in our lives, so why try to make anyone fit into a tight little box?”

“Well, I know this. I know that that wide range you speak of is not for me.”

“Hey, now,” Tim said. “Let’s stay with the facts. I’ve read about the missionary position and the bundling board. I suspect right here, right now, your range is broader than that.”

If Tim was trying to pick for information about the midnight to six shift, I just let him hang there.



Finally, he said, “One more thing, one last thought, and then I’ll beat you at a game of checkers. Just something to think about until our next session.”

You’re good at those parting shots,” I said. OK, what is it?”

“Here it is,” Tim said, “starting with Adam Smith, you’ve had a very large series of MedTechs and several doctors over those years, all of them concerned about keeping your body from deteriorating, so maybe, just maybe, you’ve covered more of my ‘wider range’ than you might think.

## Chapter Nine

# A STEP BACKWARD

At last things had settled down.

My life with Eleanor couldn't be improved on, and I had made a kind of peace with Tim. I wasn't one-hundred percent taken in by the story line his "assignments" followed, but the flare-ups were fewer. When he called me buddy-boy now, it was more a term of endearment than derision. Big improvement.

Yes, I only believed a fraction of Tim's "lessons," the stuff he called history, for example, and the eighty-two year thing, and Adam Smith. All of it could be fiction, made up to confuse me, although I don't know why anyone would want to. All of it was wild and hard to swallow. But the logic behind some of the points Tim made gave me pause. I had to at least consider whatever he said, anything that made sense to me. Most of the time, we were able to have a reasonable facsimile of a discussion. My conversations with Tim were second only to my life with Eleanor. They helped maintain sanity. They were a real plus.

And then, up jumped the devil.

I'm not sure just when it began or exactly what the trigger was. When I became aware that there was trouble brewing, it was full blown.

It most likely started with Eleanor. I should not have mentioned marriage at all, not until I had convinced her and the staff that I was well on the way to really becoming a part of the new world around me.

But, sometimes, when you are sailing off on the fifth cloud of perfection, you get so giddy that you end up doing something profoundly dumb.

My involvement with Eleanor was simply perfect. Waiting for her shift was almost unbearable, and then she would appear like an angel and the whole world looked like the only place I would ever want to be instead of the sticky, sultry reality life can sometimes be without air conditioning.

We hate to blame ourselves, but when I faced the facts without excuses, I knew the blame was squarely on my shoulders.

I could think of nothing really out of the ordinary with Tim, so it just had to be my big mouth spouting off about my ideas for marriage. Life with Eleanor was idyllic, but one day I simply said more than I should have, even though I was unaware of it at the time. Oh, I knew that I had gone way too far. Without any doubt I knew that much when she started the routine about how, here, marriage concerned itself with one thing: children. And about how the serious the commitment that having children was, and how, because of my background, I might never be allowed to marry.

“The fact that you were subjected to a lifetime of propaganda,” Eleanor said, “of constant brainwashing from family and friends, and church, and school, you might never be trusted with children of your own.”

That was stuff right out of Ethringer’s mouth. Of course I objected to her flat statement and that might have made the flame leap even higher, because she said, “As I listen to you, Roger, I become more convinced that Dr. Ethringer is right in his opinion that you might, in time, become a productive member of our society, but that the remnants of your early life can never be completely erased.”

Hey, I’m not a genius or I’d have kept my mouth shut about marriage, but I am smart enough to know, when I stop to put all the pieces together, that my words were repeated to Ethringer and the staff.

## A Ladder

And I really can't blame Eleanor for talking to her Dr. Ethringer. It's her job, a job she's been on for several years, a job that brought me back into reality—even though that reality sometimes borders on insanity.

Yes, there was a change, a big change in the atmosphere, and to add credence to the old chestnut that love is blind, I first noticed the rift with Tim.

When he arrived at noon the day after I had mentioned marriage to Eleanor, there was a slight coolness to the greeting, a kind of back-to-business attitude that was not there the previous day.

"Before I start," he said, "is there anything on your agenda that we need to discuss?"

That was it. No greeting, no smile, just a question. It should have been a red flag for me, but it wasn't, at least not then. Boy, I can be obtuse.

"Yes," I said. "You said something yesterday that I don't think you meant to say."

"It's my assignment. I pretty well know what I have to do or say to complete it. I thought my words were carefully chosen. Maybe I failed. So, OK, spit it out. What's bothering you."

He was direct, so I was direct. I let him have it unadorned.

"These may not be your words, Tim, but you said something about if we are all honest with ourselves, at some times in our life we were, or may have been, attracted to men, women and children."

"So?"

"Children?"

"You agree to my statement than about men and women?"

"Women, yes."

"But, it's the children part that bugs you? You're OK with men and women?"

"Not OK, Tim, but—"

"So, there's still something about masculine attraction that still hangs back there in the dark ages? Not a surprise. It was



a no-no for you for twenty-nine years. So, may I remind you of Adam Smith?”

“That’s a story,” I said, “it may be truth or fiction. But, if it were true, the attraction was not mine.”

“Touché,” Tim said. “Good point, but let me ask you another question. I want you to think about it before you give me a pat answer. Have you never seen a boy or another man that was so handsome or so interesting looking that he was an immediate standout over all the other guys you ran into? Think, now. No fast answers.”

I didn’t need a long time to think, but I did let a few seconds pass by before I said, “Look, I’m not blind. Some people are more handsome than others, some people have better figures than others, so, yes, I will agree with what you say, but that is not sexual attraction.”

“Yes, it is,” he said. “It may not be overt, but the sexual element is there, even when it’s only your best friend or the Adonis in a photograph.”

“There’s room for argument there, Tim”

“The more honest you are with yourself, buddy-boy, the less room there is for argument.”

I had had more than enough of the way this conversation had gone. It was one of Tim’s familiar themes. As far as I was concerned, he had nitpicked his last time with me, at least for that day. It had become entirely too personal, and was not about my question to him. So I said it straight out.

“What about sexual contacts with children, Tim? That’s the question I asked. It’s wrong, plain wrong.”

“You’re back to right and wrong?” He was using his I’m-being-patient-with-you voice.

“You’re damned right I am.”

“OK,” Tim said, “let’s talk about it. Dr Ethringer had this subject on the list, but when it happens out-of-order, when it just crops up, we all decided to go with it. We always knew our schedule could be upset. So, not a problem. We’ll simply adjust the natural flow our retraining takes.”

“Pushing children, or forcing children, into unnatural acts can be life-changing. It can warp a child’s mind,” I said, “that’s a well-known fact.”

“Fact? Fact?”

“Yes, fact. There are any number of studies that show the tragic effects of the monsters who prey on children.”

“Studies, yes, you had studies. You had a great many more of them that never got published. Never got published! Do you want to know why?”

When I didn’t give the desired answer, Tim went on as though I had.

He said, “Those studies you spoke of were usually sponsored. When the money man had the answer he wanted to hear, the study was published, but when the study did not generate the desired answer, he paid for the work that had been done and buried the failed study way back in the archives of the company. So, Roger, let’s don’t quote studies.”

“But, you have to know, Tim, a grown man should not be corrupting the innocence of a child. It’s not natural.”

He gave me that look. And then he said:

“Let’s talk about natural, Roger. Let’s not talk about good and evil, or right and wrong. Yes, I know more about boys than I do about girls, because I’m a boy. I know what my own experience was and is. But, let’s not go by me. Let’s pretend that my experience might be slanted. Here’s what I do know for certain. Every mother, worldwide, knows of a myriad of sexual arousals that children have, physical arousals. It happened in your day and it happens today.”

Yes, I had heard of such things, and while some people considered them to be a little “cute thing,” an event to be shared with a husband or giggled at with a close girl friend, it was not a part of general conversation at dinner time, not, at least, at our house.

“Are you going to tell me that was not a completely natural happening? Children do not have lascivious thoughts. Such

events are instinctive, like wanting to eat and dirtying a diaper.”

With that whole last sequence of events, Tim’s looked straight at me, almost as though he were daring me to look away. He had made a point and he knew it.

Not to let the momentum falter, he plunged on. “And what mother doesn’t know about little boys playing with themselves, innocently dinging the dong—in the house, outdoors or wherever they happened to be.”

Another point I knew to be out there.

“Need I say ‘Natural?’”

I said nothing, so he went on.

“So, in your world, what did a mother do? If she was a smart mother, she made little of it, or she said something about such behavior was not to be done in public, or she said something like, “Stop that, Roger, or you’ll go blind.”

That time—that example—was more than a base hit, it was a home run, and he knew it.

To drive the point home he said, “You didn’t go blind, did you, Roger?”

Tim won the point, so he pushed it harder.

“That was all natural, Roger. Innocent and natural. And while every human is different, some of us may have skipped one these phases or added one, but that does not make them any less universal. Young children, left to their own natural instincts, are autoerotic.”

Tim was on high ground and he knew it, so he plowed on.

“The next phase of a normal life, using your demeaning labels, might be called unnatural or homosexual, but not by our standards. We have no labels. We have natural progressions. Kids discover that other kids play the same games. So, with a brother, a cousin or the boy or girl next door, the little games become a twosome or threesome or foursome.”

Then, with one huge swat, he sent the ball sailing for a home run.

“All innocent, all playful,” he said, “all, I might add, natural.”

Maybe, because he had a plan and I did not, he was beating me into the floor with what seemed to be irrefutable logic.

“Are you ready for the next progression, the next phase of it?”

By that time I was pretty well drained. I just didn’t want to listen while he grew the boy to manhood. I was fully aware that he had more ammunition.

Like a punch drunk fighter, I struggled to get back to my feet. I had one punch left in me. I tried to KO him.

“You’re doing it again, Tim,” I said. “What I said and what I believe is that a grown man trying any kind of sexual monkey-shines with a child is bound to cause undue harm to that child. It’s abuse. You are avoiding that.”

“I’m not avoiding it, buddy-boy, but I did want to discuss the topic so that you followed the natural order of things. From childhood to adulthood. There is a basis to all things, and sometimes you screw things up if you don’t know the basis.”

There was hardly a pause between his denial of my accusation and the next part of his prepared speech.

“That’s why I wanted to have a logical progression,” he said. “Our belief is that all sexual activity that is mutual, that is not coerced—physically or mentally—won’t do one iota of harm. What difference is it if the act is between two people of different ages, if the act itself does not create a wave, or if it’s between two persons of the same age? Age alone should not be a factor. I’ve read some of your trial proceedings. People have gone to jail, had their lives ruined, because one of them was less than eighteen and the other over that age—even by a day.”

Once again, his accurate reporting of what I knew to be true sent me reeling. Yes, I knew of or had read of such cases, whether the act in question was same sex or different sex, and whether it was or was not consensual.

He said, “How did this age of eighteen come up? Didn’t it used to be twenty-one, and didn’t different states sometimes use different ages? It surely was not based on anyone’s religion. So, if it’s a sliding bar, who slides it? And where is bottom?”



With Tim's report of the past that he had read about and that I knew—mostly a monologue on his part—Tim had thoroughly boggled my mind. I was like Alice at the tea party. Up was down and down was up

Tim looked at his watch. "Time is almost up, buddy-boy. I've given you more than enough to think about."

He picked up his briefcase and walked to the door. He turned and gave me a little salute, and there was that smile again, that irritating smile.

## Chapter Ten

# UpHEAVAL

As usual, Waldo followed Tim's noon to six shift, as had been our routine for several days for days. There was little talk. The exams, he told me, were going to be given in the next three day, and this was his last night to cram for them.

It didn't really matter, I'd had quite enough for one day with Tim. And besides, Waldo was fairly new and didn't really know me at all. I tried to use Waldo's shift for sleep. Sleep was always limited during Eleanor's time with me.

I showered, brushed my teeth and hit the sack early.

But, I was awake at midnight when Eleanor came in. The minutes before she arrived were almost painful. I had such anticipation, and the second hand on that clock seemed to take forever before it chugged forward one slow click at a time.

As it always was, when she arrived, when she stepped through that door, the whole room took on a radiance.

That particular night was one to remember, and later I realized that she knew something I didn't know.

I usually went on my trip outside with Hensley on the six to noon shift. But, this time, Hensley didn't relieve Eleanor. It was Waldo—Waldo, the student, cramming for his exams, Waldo who had just been with me from six to midnight.

"What gives, Waldo? Did you mess up? You were just here, six to midnight. With exams, don't they let you get some sleep?"

"Don't know," he said. "Someone came and routed me out of bed. You never know what they're doing in Administration. Without seniority, you just live with it."

“Boy, with exams coming up,” I said, “you need some rest.”

He shrugged.

That shrug said, “What can I do about it?” Right then he had my sympathy. Poor guy. Oh, yes, I know about exams and no sleep. We’ve all had it happen.

“Hensley usually take me on the outside on the morning shift. Why don’t we just skip it today. You can study or nap.”

“Thanks for the thought,” he said, “but we can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I have an assignment, I make a report.”

“Then why don’t we go out then, but cut it short?”

I could see the idea clicking. His face showed that his brain was rolling the idea over and over.

“We could go to The Council,” he said. “It was reference work I didn’t think I’d have time for. You don’t mind?”

“Mind? Hell no. Somebody’s picking on you with this double-up of sessions.”

And that’s what happened.

While he did his thing, I went to the museum—same building, different floor. There was an Adam Smith room. I didn’t enter it.

We were back in time for Waldo’s nap while we both waited for Tim. He slept on my bed and I was sure to keep tabs on the clock. I didn’t want him sacked out when Tim arrived.

Yes, when I think of it, I should have known something was about to break when Hensley wasn’t there for his shift and Waldo had to do double duty. I should have, but I didn’t. Ethringer runs a tight ship. This shakeup of schedules was not like him at all. Something had happened that brought about this change, and the other changes I would soon be experiencing.

I didn’t see it, feel it, or understand it.

At noon, Tim arrived. Not early, not late, but right on time. As he did his paperwork, I knew he had the session all planned out. He hummed a little atonal melody as he got his paperwork all neatly laid out.

Call it childish of me, but I was irritated by his attitude and his damnable neatness—every little corner of every little paper lined up.

“Today will be a little different, our schedule has been changed” Tim said. “but before that gets going, we have a few minutes for review or for questions. I know you were a little upset with what was called ‘abuse of children’ in your day, and anything forced was abuse, or anything that wasn’t agreeable to either participant. On that point we are in complete agreement.”

He watched me intently as he delivered that last bit. He wanted to see how much I had come over to his point of view. I was still of the same opinion. He had used the term I was familiar with. It was child abuse. I tried to show nothing I was feeling, because I didn’t want to rock the boat. I wanted to marry, even if I had to fake it.

“Kids have sexual experiences you know, whether you like it or not, and whether you are willing to admit it or not. It happens.”

I made the effort to keep a blank face. I know Tim and all the rest of them made daily reports, and I know that my expressions or lack of them were duly recorded. When the day comes when Eleanor and I apply for a marriage license, all those the records will factor into the decision.

“Buddy-boy,” Tim said, “why don’t you drop the shell of your crazy ideas of what’s right and what’s wrong. Why don’t you—just for the next five or ten minutes—be completely honest with yourself. If you can do it for just a few minutes, you’ll admit that you’ve been right there yourself.”

When I said nothing, he said, “It doesn’t matter what you did when you were a kid. I already know the answer. Hey, basically, we’re not all that different. We’re human. I had kid experiences and I know you did. Mine were without guilt. I don’t know about yours, but based on my research, the hobgoblin of going blind or being caught had to be there. The memory may have been stifled, and that’s why, just for a short time, I’d like for you to drop the pretense that was pounded into you.”



I stayed mute. He changed his approach. Back to a direct question.

“Yes or no, did you have any early sexy play, boy or girl?”

It was a question I decided to ignore, but, yes, I did have a memory of an I’ll-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours that led to some touchy play and lots of giggling. It ended with a mother coming down the hall, but it was a memory that stayed, because I can still remember it. I was not, however, going to give Tim his moment of pleasure. He had pinned me down.

“Right,” Tim said. “You don’t have to say a word. It was written on your face. And, I’ll tell you one more thing that I know for sure. It’s a good memory that you have. There was nothing evil or shoddy about it. It was an innocent and very natural event.”

I kept a lid on it. I just let me rant on, and he did.

“As children, you had not had the mantle of guilt thrown over a very natural act. You did what you did because it was fun and new and exciting. It was only later, when you were told what little boys didn’t do, that the guilt started. Little boys don’t cry, little boys don’t play with dolls, little boys don’t touch themselves down there, and the list goes on.”

And, damn him, he was right about that, too. Yes, I remember the Christmas my sister Ann got a doll and I didn’t. I heard maybe not the same words but the same message. Yes, I was told that little boys don’t play with dolls and that little boys don’t touch down there. I gave up on the doll, but some things didn’t stop. They just went underground. They became a bathroom activities behind closed doors or a nighttime activities. With guilt? Sure, and with a thousand resolutions of quitting that never quite happened.

“You know, buddy-boy, when you flip the lid off a boiling pot, the steam rushes out and the pressure is relieved. Your emotions are like that. Even without external pressures, the body builds up a head of steam. The lid gets lifted or it is blown off. In severe cases the pot boils over onto the burner, onto the stove, onto the floor. In the worst cases, the pot boils dry and the house catches fire.”

Plainly, Tim was now dealing with his assignment, his early assignment, before, as he put it, “our schedule was changed.”

He'd was determined to get the assignment done even if he had to rush it. That much seemed clear to me, because he was rushing through the material he had prepared.

"When the house catches fire," he said, "that's when you have a murder or a man so raving crazy that he has to be put in restraints. Every man and woman is a boiling pot. In your day, marriage or common law was a way to lift the lid, often at a great price in human dignity. Many men and women stayed in miserable relationships just to get someone to lift the lid."

He took a quick look at his watch and then he said, "Well, more of this later. I need to prep you for what's coming. What you are about to find out today is that whether you are a man or a woman, the lid can be lifted by either a man or a woman. You are going to be a part of a little experiment, a little practical experiment. No emotions involved, it's all tactile."

Well, now, that brought me to life. That made me ready to talk. An experiment?

"I don't like the sound of this," I said.

"In a way, buddy-boy, you brought it on yourself."

"I still don't like the sound of it, whoever may or may not have caused it. The result is, I'm going to the far-out lab of Dr. Frankenstein. Don't I have a say? Why?"

"It's a staff decision," Tim said. "My work goes well only on those days when you are open to it. When we push too hard on any of those things, you fall back into the dogmas of the world you formerly lived in. And that's when progress slows. So, rather than talk, staff felt practical experiments might open your mind a little more quickly."

"Staff? Or, was it Ethringer?"

"Yes, he's coordinating, but it was a staff decision."

"What is it today? Cattle probes?"

"It will all be tactile: rubbing, pinching, stroking, patting, squeezing."

"Now I really don't like it."

"Let's get going. We're due there in less than five. You can walk with me or we can take you. Chose one."

It was only then I noticed the five guys just outside my door. I decided to walk.

It was in another part of the university complex, down several different corridors to a room I had never been in—at least not that I remembered. It was an examining room, yes, with the standard table and hard pad, but it was larger by far than the standard cubicle. A teaching room perhaps. There was space for people that's for sure, and I could hear voices from the next room. Ethringer was the only one there and he was in a back corner. He appeared to be asleep. So that he didn't have to even acknowledge my presence? Hard to be sure, but I chose to think he was deliberately ignoring my arrival.

Tim said, "What are you wearing under the tunic?"

"Briefs."

"Take them off."

"Off?"

"No," he said, "on second thought, leave them on. Up on the table, Roger, on your back. You'll draped before we let the students in."

If I didn't like the idea of this experiment, I liked it even less as we began its execution. An argument wasn't feasible, not with Ethringer in the corner and not with the five guys who came with Tim to escort me.

I got on the table. The only thing I could do was to shut my eyes and hope that it all would be over soon. And, yes, clearly, I was going to be a specimen, this was a classroom and there were students just on the other side of the door.

And, then came the draping by two nurses or student nurses, and it wasn't the body draping that is done for surgical procedures. All it amounted to was a barrier of sheets across my chest and mounted well above the bed. My body would be exposed to the students but not my head or my face, and, by the same token, I couldn't see them.

When that was done, Tim said, "You can make this long or short, Roger. It will all be tactile—touchy-feely. Cooperate and it will go quickly. It's up to you. If you are typical of your gender

and your class, touching had very definite rules back then. Men and women could touch each other when appropriate and it was perfectly acceptable; women could touch, hug, cling and cry together and it was OK; but, men touching men was taboo, it was just plain unacceptable.

“The point of this procedure today is to show clearly that touching is touching, regardless of who does it. I have no doubt that you believe you can tell the difference, so the experiment is to find out if you are correct. You will be touched by men and women, students from here in the building. In each instance, you are to tell us if it is a man’s touch or a woman’s. Very simple. One or the other. You have a fifty-fifty chance of being right with a pure guess, so with your past experience, you should be able to do far better than that. That’s it. A one-word answer. Just male or female.”

Good God, I thought, what have I done to deserve this?

What I said was, “And what will we prove?”

“Maybe nothing,” he said. “Or maybe we’ll prove that touching, one human being to another, is a natural, normal thing—a thing that feels good, brings joy and is even healthy.”

The whole thing sounded silly, juvenile, downright crazy, and was sure to be a big embarrassment. I grunted.

“Remember, it can all be over quickly,” Tim said. “Up to you. Shall I bring the students in?”

I nodded, and in they came. I couldn’t see it, but I knew what was happening. The jabbering and noise stopped when they saw Ethringer sitting in the back corner.

Tim spoke to them. “You know the procedure,” he said, “this whole thing has been thoroughly discussed. Both you men and the women know what is expected. It is a lesson. Even when it might be funny, let’s try to remember we’re in a classroom and you will be graded.”

There was a pause. In my mind’s eye, I could see him giving each of them the cold teacher-pupil stare.

And then he said, “So, let’s begin.”



## Chapter Eleven

### **TACTILE TOMFOOLERY**

From the onset of that ordeal, I tried to focus on Tim's words: "...it can be over quickly. It's up to you."

At the beginning it wasn't difficult to keep that thought in mind, but this whole thing was a planned event I felt sure, even if it was presented as something pushed into the schedule at the last moment.

The first of the little tests was quite simple. Someone removed my sandals. The unbuckling was not really rough, but it was not as gentle as it could be either, and the sandals were pulled from my feet instead of being slid off.

"Female," I said.

I was pretty sure they were trying to fool me by a lack of of TLC. The next thing was a scratching of the bottom of my foot, with something like a small stick or pencil point, in a lopsided, lazy-eight pattern. It was gentle, very gentle. Once again, I felt it was a deliberate effort to throw me completely off at the very outset of the experiment.

"Male."

Then there was a kind of bandage thing, wrapped around one ankle and then joined to the other ankle. It was rubber or something with rubber in it. I could feel the stretching. We had student nurses here so the participants were probably more female than male. I tried to keep that in mind.

"Female," I said.

I'm not going to try to remember each of these rather juvenile tests, but I do remember ice on the tender spot on the back

## A Ladder

of my knee, and feathers, an emery board, and a hot cloth. This whole procedure, little by little, progressed up my leg.

But, I hung in there. I wanted it over. Tim was right, though. It moved along quickly. One little prod followed the other as fast as I gave my answers.

I dreaded what I knew was coming, but it was worse than anything I expected. From my inner thigh it was fingers on top of my briefs and then I heard Tim say, "Pull'em down."

My self control stood me in good stead until I got to the finger painting on my privates, but a man can control only so much fondling. I tried to keep on with the guessing game, tried to hang in there. But, finally, it was plainly well past just fondling. I reached the point where I was no longer capable of even rational thought, much less guessing.

And, of course, it happened.

My good intentions were thrown to the winds. I'm sure it's not just true of me, but there comes a time when every man or woman is no longer in control, no longer of this earth.

When that happened, I didn't bother with Tim's one-word answers. I wasn't able to logically determine exactly "who was doing what," but I was absolutely certain of "to whom."

The round of applause from the students in the room seemed to come to my ears from long way away, like a cave or an echo chamber.

As I came back to reality, I heard Tim dismiss the students and thank them for the participation. I heard Ethringer saying something about "anticipated results." I felt only a strong feeling of humiliation. I had been used and abused.

Within three minutes, they were all gone, including Ethringer. It was just Tim and me.

"You are a bastard," I said.

"Maybe yes and maybe no, buddy-boy," Tim said. "The shower is in the room behind you. I've sent for a fresh tunic and briefs. In ten minutes it will just a memory, I hope a good one.

"Bastard," I said, "bastard."

As I shut the bathroom door behind me, I heard him say, "You flunked, buddy-boy. You did reasonably well at the beginning, but when your nature took over, it was down hill fast."

Chapter Twelve  
**THE AFTERMATH**

I was back in my room before six. Tim left as soon as I was returned to my home base. There was no more talk about the experimental session, not as we walked back, or when we got to my room. He just turned and walked away.

Good riddance.

Hensley was on from six to midnight, a change in the routine. We usually had little to say to each other, but on this occasion I had absolutely nothing to say to anybody.

Yes, I took a shower after Tim's experiment, but it did not wash away of the degradation I felt.

Of one thing I was certain: Hensley knew what had just happened. He was kind enough not to say anything, but he knew. I'm sure they all knew. What about Eleanor? Did she know, was she in on this? I just wanted to crawl in a hole and drag the hole in after me.

I could skip all talk with Hensley, but Eleanor was another matter. The whole dirty little episode would have to be talked about. I usually wished the hours away until midnight. Usually, waiting for her to arrive grew more unbearable by the minute. Now, I dreaded to see minutes pass.

I was wide awake when I heard the town clock strike twelve. Hensley had already gone, but there was no sign of Eleanor. It was both a relief and a worry. Eleanor was always on time.

At about five after the hour, a young kid came in, a kid of maybe sixteen or seventeen.



“Are you Roger? I’m Kevin, your substitute for this shift.”

“Substitute,” I said. “What happened to Eleanor?”

“Hey,” he said, “I don’t know anything about that. I think I heard she was transferred to Library Research, but I didn’t pay that much attention. I was too excited about being sent here. This is new to me. It’s the first shift I ever worked.”

“You’re a student?”

“Yes. I’m in my last year.”

“Well, you won’t have much to report. I’m going to bed. You can use that chair over there, it leans back.”

With that remark I left the kid to his own devices. I didn’t give a damn what he did as long as he didn’t smirk when he looked at me and as long as I didn’t have to talk to him.”

I hit the bed, turned over toward the wall, but sleep didn’t happen for more than an hour. I just laid there, pondering what this turn of the screw was all about. And I was sure it was a turn of the screw, a tightening of the orientation I was obviously being subjected to. Was this Tim or was it Ethringer?

And, how was I expected to react?

I was mad as hell at both of them for the events of the afternoon, and I didn’t know which one to blame. And, now this. Eleanor transferred.

If I knew—knew for sure—Tim was behind this, he could go shit in the corner as far as I was concerned. He’d get nothing out of me from here on. I’d be the great stone face, I’d be as chatty as the Sphinx.

But, I didn’t know. The only thing I could do was watch him, watch for any sign that the experiment or Eleanor’s transfer was, in any way, his idea.

I had a miserable night, even the part of it when I did get some sleep.

Waldo was there at six. We had breakfast together and he told me about the exams. Tough but fair, he said. And we talked about our outside plans for the rest of the morning.

What we did not talk about was what had happened to me yesterday afternoon with a bunch of giggling students. I’ll

## A Ladder

never know for sure whether this subject didn't come up—even obliquely—because he had an innate sense of courtesy, or whether it was an incident so common that he had no interest in it.

Whatever the reason, Waldo moved up a notch in my estimation.

It was a pleasant morning, warm sunshine, easy conversation and a great respite from the past eighteen hours.

And, then the session was almost over. The big minute hand on my wall clock kept moving toward twelve.

Soon Tim would be here.

## Chapter Fourteen

### **WE TURN A SHARP ANGLE**

Boy, were they pulling my strings.

The sessions with Hensley, Kevin, and Waldo, were without any kind of incident, but that was not true of Tim. The next day he came through the door with a big grin on his face, and he said, “No session today.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. He left yesterday in a kind of snit because I hadn’t fallen all over myself agreeing with his rape theories. Hell, I knew that sexual feelings could only be kept in check for a limited amount of time before something had to give. Every schoolboy knows that. It’s find an outlet or just take care of the job yourself.

“You told me to think, to understand the gist—”

He interrupted. “You don’t have to think today, I won’t badger you, and you won’t frustrate me. Orientation is postponed, at least for my session. We’re going out, you and I, and I have a surprise for you.”

I was dumbfounded and I must have looked it.

“It’s real, buddy-boy. We’re going out. Take a quick shower, put on a fresh tunic, and let’s go.”

It just didn’t sound like Tim. There hadn’t been a day when he wasn’t chewing at what he called my stone-age ideas of life. To simply drop it completely was just not Tim’s style. I kept expecting the other shoe to drop.

“Let’s go, boy” he said, “let’s go. Hit the shower. Let’s get out of here.”

I had showered that morning, but what the hell. I took another quick one, just to humor him, and I did put on a fresh tunic.

When I was dressed, he shuttled me out and onto the street. As we walked, I certainly recognized the direction we were taking, but it didn't quite register in my unbelieving brain. We were taking the turn off Main that led to Eleanor's house.

Within minutes we were there.

"Just call me cupid," he said. "She's there and she's expecting you. Let's just say I'm trying to atone for the afternoon of a day or two ago."

I just stood there like a dummy. This was not like Tim.

"Go on," he said. "Don't keep a lady waiting. I'll be back at 5:30 to check you in."

Eleanor opened the door before I even had a chance to knock. Somehow there had been a little collusion between Tim and my beloved Eleanor. Yes, she was expecting me. Indeed, yes. She was wearing a different kind of tunic. At work, it was a plain tailored, un-fancy tunic, very much like mine, but on that day it was a wisp of feminine fluff—thin, floaty material and she looked like an angel.

Two glasses of wine were already on the table, but they were ignored. She was in my arms before we got the door closed.

What a wonderful afternoon. No talk of orientation, no probing questions, nothing to upset either of us. Her abrupt reassignment did not seem to upset her. She simply acknowledged the fact that Ethringer was right in what he did. She admitted that she was no longer able to remain dispassionate, and that further work with me would be a bad idea.

I liked that information and I didn't like it. I liked the fact that she couldn't work with me without bias. She loved me, I was sure of that. But I didn't like the fact that I wouldn't be seeing her every single day, when she came on shift. That was the worm in the apple.

And then, all too soon, it was 5:30, and Tim gently rapped three times on the door.



“OK,” he said, “it’s back to the cage, Tiger.”

Hensley was already there when we got checked in. If he knew of Tim’s plan for my afternoon, he didn’t show it. It was just routine Hensley, except for one incident. About halfway through his shift, along about nine o’clock, he leaned back from his work, rubbed his eyes and kind of sprawled on his chair.

“Got a question,” he said, “something that has been bugging me for a long time. Do you mind?”

“Mind? Would that do me any good? You guys are full of questions. It’s all a part of the sessions. I’m getting used to it.”

“No, Roger, this is not a part of a session. It’s just something that has been a little mystery to me. I thought the answer would come out as we went along, but it hasn’t. This is just something...” he hesitated and then went on, “...something that seemed curious to me. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. Just call me nosy.”

“Hey, go ahead. What’s one more question?”

“Well, from what I’ve read of the history of your period, a man of your age, twenty-nine, would have married, or if not married, would have been in some kind of live-in arrangement. Not true in your case, is it? Or, have I missed something?”

Well, it was back to the same old thing. It was always something to do with sex. A question that Tim had missed somehow. If they were so damned free with it, why did they have such a curiosity about it? But, I had had a wonderful day, so I could be generous. I don’t know if it was the answer he was looking for, but it was what it was, back there in my saner days.

“Well, I never gave it much thought, but yes,” I said, “I may have been a little ripe on the vine for marriage. Most of my friends were married. It was probably a little bit of two things. One was that I hadn’t met anybody like Eleanor, and the second one was that I was building a business, one client at a time, and I was pretty successful at it. My accounting firm had grown to twenty-three full-time employees and four part-timers. I had my nose to the grindstone. It is—or it was—a competitive business. I had long hours.”

"But you weren't a hermit?"

"No, not a hermit. There were little flingy-dingies. Some that lasted longer than others, but marriage was just not on my agenda."

"No camping trips with one of your buddies?"

There was a connotation in that question.

"I hate to disappoint you—and Ethringer if this is his idea—but no, nothing like that."

The mention of Ethringer got a quick reaction from him.

"I said this was my curiosity, Roger. It has nothing to do with Dr. Ethringer."

"Sorry," I said. "He's playing God all the time. I just thought—"

"Nothing to do with him," he said. "Apology accepted."

And, that was it until the Kevin came on at midnight. My mood was still relaxed, the afternoon with Eleanor fresh in my mind, so I loved the world.

In an effort to be a little less distant with the kid. I said, "Tests over, Kevin?"

"No," he answered. "I have one more, tomorrow."

"Think you're doing OK?"

"I think so, I hope so."

"Go ahead and study," I said. "I'm going to hit the sack."

As I turned to leave Kevin said, "Do you want anything, need anything, Roger? Something to make you sleep?"

Now, it wasn't the words. The words were simple enough, open enough. It might have been the tone. I'm not sure what the indicator was, but one thing I do know for sure: I had just been propositioned.

For his sake and mine, I decided to ignore it.

I just said, "Good night, Kevin. Get back to the books."

## Chapter Fifteen

### **A DAY AT THE BEACH**

Either I was making pretty good progress at understanding the social mores of my new world, or Ethringer & Company decided to ease up on the orientation. I'm not sure which one of these was the major factor, or maybe it was both. The reality is, there was a noticeable change in my sessions.

The social and sexual part of these sessions seemed to have switched places with the physical. The social was not as pronounced and the physical aspects of them grew in proportion. Instead of muscle strengthening and stretching, which had been the rule of the day, it was moving into contact sports and endurance. I was pushed to the limit.

As for the social part of it, the orientation seemed more relaxed. Oh, I'm not saying Tim dropped the ball altogether, but he wasn't as overbearing as he had been. The big change was that we had conversations, real conversations, rather than lectures.

On one of those days he said, "Let's go to the beach today. I've just come in from out there, and it's a great day, much too nice to hang around in here."

Another big surprise, and there had been quite a few of them recently.

In five minutes, we were on the beach. It was crowded. Tim found a place near a jetty that wasn't too full of people. He dropped his satchel on the sand and took his clothes off.

"Shuck those clothes, Roger. That sun is bearing down. They'll be too hot."

## A Ladder

When I hesitated, he really got a belly laugh. "I knew you were going to do that, Mr. Modest," he said. "And, I have the answer for it right here."

He dug into that little satchel and came out with a thong, a mere wisp of a thing.

"Off with the clothes," he said. "This will do, and you won't be overdressed."

I took a quick look around. Nobody paid the slightest attention to the two of us, so I did what I had to do. I got out of my tunic and briefs and put on the thong. Then, as quickly as I could, I sat down on the sand and tried to look comfortable.

Like a happy land crab, Tim laid there on the beach, eyes closed, at peace with the world. For several minutes there was no talk, and little by little I got over the feeling that I might be stared at.

"Back there in the ancient world, Roger," he said, "did you ever know anybody that stayed in what appeared to be an impossible marriage, year after year after year?"

I didn't have to think about that one. I had a professor once, a man I got to know pretty well. Good guy, married to a shrew. She was the world's worst whiner and on top of that she seemed to take delight in belittling him in public.

"Yes," I said, "None of us could understand why he didn't leave her, divorce her, or kill her. But, he stayed. God knows why. Maybe religion."

"It could be religion," he said, "or it could be something more basic."

"And," I said, "you're back to your theme."

"Yes, back to the trinity: eating, sleeping and sex. Everything else springs from one of these three sources. Everything you do has its genesis in the trinity."

"You oversimplify," I said.

"Do I? Name me one thing that can't be traced back to one of these three."

I jumped on that one. "Well, there's one of the things you mention often: shitting."



“Too easy,” he said. “You didn’t bother to even think that one through. Goes back to eating, buddy boy. If you stopped eating...”

He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to. But it started a little game. Most of conversations we had weren’t games, but this one didn’t seem like a session and it was fun. We both played, although I tried harder to find an activity that couldn’t be traced back to his trinity.

I didn’t find one. Maybe one exists, but I didn’t find it.

“Now,” Tim said, “let’s talk about your professor friend. He stayed with her, berated by her, humiliated by her. Why? It wasn’t eating and it wasn’t sleeping. There’s only one leg of the trinity left, Roger.”

“It could have been religion,”

“Yes,” he said, “it could. Poor man could have been boxed in by religion, or boxed in by the mores of your time, or maybe something else, but boxed in, sexually thwarted. The pot boiling. So, when he found an outlet sanctified by your culture, he wasn’t going to let it go. He would endure anything not to have his release shut off. Poor bastard. And he was not alone. You had millions just like him. And the boxing-in comes in many sizes. ‘Better stick with her. A fat guy doesn’t have many choices.’ or ‘I don’t have the biggest pool stick in the room, so I’d better just hang in there.’ The list is endless.”

“You make a logical case but—”

“Don’t give me any buts, buddy-boy. I have it just about right, and you know it.”

“Hey,” I said, “give me time to think.”

“OK,” he said. “One day, one day soon, you’re going to admit that I was right about the professor, and a lot of other things. And while you think, buddy-boy, remember this: We don’t have such a problem. The pot doesn’t boil over here. The lid is off. Your professor would not have had to stay.”

Well, I couldn’t come up with a damned thing to rebut his logic, so I just grunted and hoped he had made his point for the day.

## A Ladder

And, he had.

“Let’s dust the sand off, put on our clothes and head back,” he said. “The sun feels great, but you can get too much it.”

I just pulled my briefs on over the thong, but as we walked back, that damned single string up the back was a real annoyance.

## Chapter Sixteen

### **A Big Change in Routine**

We rocked along for the better part of two weeks without much of a change in the schedule. It was tough physical therapy or sports from six in the morning until noon; Tim's sessions, from noon to six, were without real incident, but he was still hell bent on picking away at what he thought were my puritan morals; six to midnight with Hensley was my relaxing time; and, from midnight to six in the morning was my time with the kid, Kevin.

The after midnight shift was really my sleep period, that and a part of the time with Hensley, depending on how hard they had been on me with the physical therapy and sports earlier. The thing I was aware of, though, was that my endurance had grown by leaps and bounds and I'd lost the fat that had accumulated in my eighty-two years, if you believe that story.

The one thing I made sure of was that I would be asleep, or appear to be asleep, when Kevin arrived. There was never another incident, but the time he made a pass at me was still fresh in my memory. I just didn't want that to happen again or anything even more overt.

That night I heard him when he came in. Because I was always asleep, he tended to come in quietly. Not this time. He came straight over to my bed and touched my shoulder, gently at first, and when I didn't respond, he gave me a real wake-up nudge.

"Wake up, Roger," he said. "Wake up. We have things to do and places to go."

## A Ladder

This was the very thing I had been trying to avoid, so I just groaned and rolled over on the bed.

He gave me a pretty strong slap across the shoulder and said, "Wake up, Roger. The schedule has been changed. You can sleep when we get there."

That did it. His actions were not what I thought they might be. This was not another approach. They were at it, Ethringer & Company. The routine was changing again.

"What in the hell—"

"There's a change in the assignment," he said. "I've just had a meeting with Tim and Dr. Ethringer. Get up and get ready."

Just to carry on my sleeping pretense, I mumbled and grumbled at having my sleep disturbed.

"Come on, Roger," he said. "Get awake. We're going out."

"Out? At midnight?"

"I'll tell you on the way," he said. "Let's go."

The gist of what he said as we walked was that he was to take me to Eleanor's apartment every night until further notice; he was free to sleep on the sofa or spend the time away, as long as he was back for the return trip. They told him his report would be simple, the time he took me there and the time he took me back to the room.

"I'm just to be your escort, there and back. That's it."

Now, I couldn't help wondering why, why this radical change? Yes, I welcomed it, but the reasons behind it were just not making sense to me. And, yes, there had been a similar incident when Tim, himself, took me to Eleanor's apartment. Was this a part of the strategy? Of one thing I was sure: It was a strategy.

"Who did this, who made this change," I said. "Was it Ethringer?"

"Dr. Ethringer, yes, and Tim. Both were there."

Just outside Eleanor's building, we bumped into—literally bumped into—a man of about fifty. He was coming out, we were going in. There were apologies all around.



And there was an exchange, a definite, decided exchange—a look that didn't need words—between Kevin and the man we had just met. It was there and then it was gone.

As we turned to go up the steps, the man said something to Kevin. It was low. I didn't hear it.

As he walked away, I said, "I missed that, Kevin. What did he say?"

"4-B," Kevin said.

I'm a little slow sometimes, but the light came on when I saw Eleanor's door. It was 3-A.

Eleanor was aware of the schedule change. I only had to tap the door. She offered wine for the three of us, but Kevin said he had things to do. He said he's be back in plenty of time, and then he excused himself and went back out into the night.

I told Eleanor what I had just seen.

"Yes," she said, "and the point of your story..."

"Kevin's a kid," I said. "He's seventeen. That was an older man."

"Oh, Roger," she said, "old sins—or imagined sins—do die slowly, don't they? Kevin will be fine."

## Chapter Seventeen

### **The Swim**

And, Kevin was fine.

That morning, on the way back to my room, I saw a happy-looking, healthy, handsome young lad who seemed to be almost as much in love with the day as I was.

The exact nature of his experiences of the night before were not evident and I don't think he was in the mood to discuss them anymore than I would care to discuss my relationship with Eleanor. People in love don't analyze, thank God, but some of their antics should never be displayed in Macy's window.

OK, Tim. As you hoped I would, I had a lot more to ponder.

I had to wonder how much of last night was staged and how much was accidental. I have grown very suspicious of everyone's motives. Ethringer is certainly capable and working at it. He moves the pieces on the board in much the same way you'd move chessmen. Yes, and Tim, too. I'd have to watch Tim for any clue about last night. Did he arrange for the meeting of Kevin and the stranger?

Tim was clearly involved with the arrangement that allowed me to be with Eleanor. Kevin told me how it happened and it had the ring of truth to it. And, more than that, such an arrangement could not have happened with the approval of one or both of them. Maybe Tim was still a question mark, but Ethringer was a period, a definite.

I had not had a lot of sleep, so the next six hours were anything but easy. It was calisthenics, primarily, with a swim afterward and, yes, I didn't bother with a thong. I finally realized that my attempts

at modesty turned me into more of a spectacle than relaxing and learning to flow with the tide.

I was sacked out when Tim arrived at noon.

If he expected me to talk about Kevin and the shenanigans of last night, he was doomed for disappointment. Kevin looked OK to me, and the rest of it was his business. And, if I were to mention that whole turn of events, it would preclude me learning whether or not Tim was a part of the accident or the charade, whichever it was.

One part of it, though, I really needed to talk about. The new schedule, for however long it lasted, allowed me to be with Eleanor. He was definitely a part of the new arrangement, and I did owe him for that.

So, I just said it the way I felt it, "I want to thank you, Tim, for the new scheduling, however much or little of it was your idea. It's a favor I won't forget."

"Intended or not," he said, "that was a halfhearted thank you, but, I'm being generous today, I'll accept it."

"I didn't mean it the way it came out," I said.

His reply was quick. "Oh, yes, you did. I recognize con."

I didn't want to dig my hole any deeper, so I just let it go.

Tim said, "I don't want to blow my own horn, buddy-boy, but, yes, I did suggest the first time I took you to Eleanor's apartment. It went well. I suggested extending that feature of our orientation program to Dr. Ethringer, so it became something for team discussion."

"I'm truly sorry, Tim. You didn't deserve that answer, and I do thank you."

"Apology accepted, this time without reservations," he said, "but, so you'll know why it happened, I'll go on. And, before you ask, yes this is a part of the session, a vital part of the orientation. As time goes on, you will know what we are doing or trying to do, and why. In the end, we want you to be a part of the team, with everything wide open. You'll live off base and work a regular shift with us, dredging your memory as best we can, so we can more clearly understand the past. That's the aim."

"I could live with Eleanor?"

"Oh, Roger, sometimes you can be so slow. You can live off base. That's all we can say. You'll make of that what you will. It's a free world out there."

Yes, we had been there before. Sometimes I let my enthusiasm get ahead of my brain. Great example. I bit my lip and let him continue.

"It was pretty well agreed that you are absorbing far more of our mores than you are admitting to. Everyone of us felt our logic was making a genuine impression while you try to cling to the ideas that even you don't believe—ideas that had been drilled into you from early childhood. We all felt the wall has started to crumble, and that it was time to allow you to pull out a little more leash."

Hey, maybe, just maybe, I was being too harsh on all of them, even Ethringer. It would be plain paradise if I could live out there without the daily shift of guards, with Eleanor, working a six-hour shift, and having the rest of the time being like every other human being.

"You're not there yet, but we are beginning to see real results. And for that reason, we talked to Eleanor. She was more than willing, so we made arrangements with Kevin just to take you there and bring you back. The boy did well on his tests. He deserves a cream-puff shift."

"You mean I'm going to be a part of the team?"

"In time," he said. "you'll be aware of our aims much more than you have been, but you won't actually be at every conference."

Oh, boy, this was a difference. I was elated. I just said, "Thanks, Tim."

"You went for a swim today after your workout, I'm told." Tim said. "You are learning to relax, aren't you? I'm pleased."

Well now, that last sentence said a lot. They are still keeping very close tabs on me. That much is crystal clear. The swim was less than an hour ago.

"Congratulations," Tim said. "No swim suit, no briefs, no thong."



## Chapter Eighteen

### **THE ROW**

No, the miracle didn't happen. I was not permitted to live off base. But, yes, I did seem to have a different status.

The nightly visits to Eleanor continued, but they were with Kevin as my escort. He took me to her apartment and back to my room. At Eleanor's door he left me for 4B, I found that out for sure.

I tried not to stick my nose in where it wasn't wanted, but one day on the walk back to my room, my worry about the kid got to be too much.

"Are you OK, Kevin?"

"Sure, why do you ask?"

"Well, you're young. I just thought it might be dangerous for you, after midnight, to be roaming around."

"I'd be perfectly safe, Roger, even if I were roaming around, but I'm even safer. I bunk with a couple of guys in Eleanor's building. I'm just up on the second floor, the apartment almost above hers."

And that was it.

What I thought might be some kind of an odd arrangement, immoral, even a forced arrangement, was what he passed off as, "I bunk with a couple of guys..."

I told Eleanor about it. I didn't think it would disturb her, but it did.

"I wish you hadn't done that, Roger," she said. "You seemed to be doing so well. But, that—that kind of question underlines the fact that you are hanging onto old ideas."

So, yes, I did it again. My big mouth,

And then she said, "We can only hope that that little exchange was so minor to Kevin that it didn't get into his report. To Dr. Ethringer, that incident would slide your momentum back a notch or two. The guys think you are moving right along in the orientation, but he's not so sure."

And then we had our first argument.

"We need to do something to show your momentum, your acceptance," she said. "It needs to be something dramatic, something positive, something Kevin will put in his report. We need a plan."

"You mean a setup, something phony."

"It needn't be phony, but it does need to be planned. It could be my best friend, Julia. I've known her since I was about five or six. She'd do it if I asked her."

"Do what, Eleanor? You're losing me. I don't know what you're saying."

"Spend the night with you, silly. Kevin could bring you here as usual, she will answer the door and let you know that I've been called away—mother ill or something. You will come in as usual, and Kevin will put the whole thing in his report. Oh, great idea," she said. "That would do it."

Had I heard her correctly? She was proposing that I stay here with her best friend, and if I understood her, more than play tic-tac-toe. "It needn't be phony," were her words.

Eleanor," I said, hardly believing my own ears, "you shock me. I'm speechless. She's your best friend."

"Another one of your taboos? Triangles and best friends and all that. I've read how that idea was just beyond the pale."

"I'll say."

"Then, how about my brother? He'll do it for me."

That did it. Now, I was really getting angry.

"I can't believe what I heard. Yes, I'd like to hurry along the day when I could move in here, but—"

"Then let's get real. Roger."

"People in love are faithful to each other—"

“Here, married people are faithful. It keeps the lineage straight, it protects the children. It’s a sacred contract. Unmarried people are unfettered.”

“But, you’ve been faithful,” I said.

“In my fashion,” she said. “I’ve cut out guys.”

“Cut out guys? What does that mean?”

“You know about Julia, Roger. She’s my best and oldest friend. She was my first, the first I really remember. We’re close.”

“You mean—”

“I mean,” she said, “there are times when a girl just plain needs a little soft and cuddly, curvy, companionship. Julia is all of that. You’ll like her.”

“Like hell I will,” I said. “You’re the one for me and I thought—”

“We are unmarried, Roger, unfettered. We are free souls. There’s no one like you for me and for as long as it lasts—and it may last a lifetime—and I’m happy, but we have no contract. I don’t and you don’t.”

I was crestfallen. My world had just dropped into a bottomless pit. And I was angry, angry at myself for not remembering that this was not a girl from my hometown. This was a girl from today, whatever in the hell that is.

And then I heard the three taps on the door.

Kevin was there for the walk back to my room.

## Chapter Nineteen

### CONNOTATIONS

I didn't wallow in my misery for long. I barely had time to finish my breakfast when the therapy guys were there. What a morning. I hate push-ups, but I got them that day plus a good long run along the beach before the swim.

Tim was already in the room when I came dragging through the door. I walked over and sacked out on the bed.

"Heavy morning or not enough sleep?"

That's all he said, but my string was short from Eleanor's revelation about her experiences with Julia, and worse, her plan for moving my "off-base days" forward.

Black, black clouds over all the world. Tim's question only added to it.

"Prying?" That's all I said, but it had nasty a ring to it.

"Oh, boy," he said, "there must be trouble in Paradise."

I said, "Back off, Tim"

"OK, OK," he said. "I meant no harm, and since you're in such a bad mood, we'll skip the orientation for today. Let's do a little team practice instead. When you are finally just a part of the team, we'll have discussions on the minutiae of your life back then. Just how you feel about something that bugs us or simply don't understand, or how you were a part of or rejected it."

"Like what?" My tone still wasn't very nice.

"Look, buddy-boy," he said, "whatever it is that's eating you, I wasn't a part of it. Get off your high horse."

He stared me down. He was right, of course. He had done nothing. It was Eleanor.



“Sorry,” I finally said.

“OK, let’s start over. I do a lot of reading, most of it as a part of my job, but not all of it. When I’m reading, especially the fiction of those days back then, I find words that are a part of the natural acts of love making used as insults. Why? It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like ‘You’re a screw up,’ although the the more primitive word is often used. It’s meant as an insult. It’s like saying, ‘You’re dumb, you can’t do anything right.’ For us, the meaning of the word ‘screw,’ although it’s both slang and vulgar, has a better connotation.”

It was something I’d never given any thought to. You knew what someone meant by the way it was said. But, to get my mind off Eleanor and her plan, I kind of ran the idea through my brain, and, yes, I could think of other words that had one meaning one way and the exact opposite in another way.

“Well,” I said, “I can think of a couple of others that can mean either good or bad. ‘He’s a smart bastard’ is meant as a compliment, while ‘He’s a dumb bastard’ means just the opposite.”

“That’s the idea,” he said, “That’s exactly what I mean. And you have a good example. The word bastard is meant to be an insult. The child of unwed parents, an illegitimate child. A word we don’t use anymore, not with our strict marriage rules.”

Marriage rules! Damn. Up jumped the specter of Eleanor again.

I said, “Spare me the marriage rules, Tim. You said no orientation.”

Then it was his turn to say “sorry.” He did, without hesitation.

“Here’s another one,” I said, “‘Shit, yes’ and ‘shit, no.’ Both are more than definite, and both mean exactly the opposite. It’s emphasis. It’s more than a simple yes or no.”

“Good one,” Tim said, “really a good one. Strong emphasis there. Now tell me how and why this kind of loose usage ever crept into the language. I’ve read dozens of these things in your

## A Ladder

novels. Now, what I'd like to know is were these also commonly used speech patterns in your day, or were they just used as emphasis in writing."

"Common," I said, "so common that I just never gave a thought to it. It's just the way we spoke, especially the guys. Macho talk."

"Macho talk? "

"You know, Tim, guy talk. It said who you were."

"If you used better speech, it had connotations? You weren't a regular guy? You didn't want any kind of label? Is that it?"

"You just wanted to be a guy, that's all."

"So you did guy talk."

"Yes, I guess that's what it amounted to."

"Phony," Tim said. "False and phony. Why not be who you are? There's no standards, we are not all wired alike."

"We just wanted to fit in."

"I am everlastingly grateful I didn't live then, buddy-boy. They would have pinned several labels on me, sometimes two at a time. I just don't think I could have adjusted to the yoke."

"I guess you just did what you thought you had to do."

"I'd have been tagged homo, hetero—what was the third one?"

"Bisexual."

"Yes, and bi. I've been all of them by your standards. By mine, I've simply just been sexual human being, taking life as it came along."

"All of them?"

"All of them. And don't act surprised. I've told you in a thousand ways, and you're not a dummy, although sometimes I'm not so sure."

It was more than I wanted to know about Tim.

Hensley arrived about that time, a few minutes early, so I was spared the details.

I was grateful.

## Chapter Twenty

# THE ASSIGNATION

I had dreaded seeing Eleanor at midnight back on the night after Tim and Ethringer's student participation test of whether or not I could identify the touch of a woman or a man. The experience had had a bad ending, a real embarrassment, a kind of sexual thing I simply didn't want to discuss. I didn't know how to tell her about the whole incident and I worried about what she may think of it—or of my behavior. As it turned out, the schedule got changed and she didn't show, but I had spent hours stewing over how the conversation might go.

Yes, that was dread.

And if that was dread, my trip to the apartment at midnight on the night after our flare-up was dread in spades. I'd have six hours there—six hours with the love of my life who had told me she was still having a relationship with her childhood best friend, Julia. She made it sound casual, just a longtime relationship, but had it gone on after I came along? I didn't know for sure, and didn't want to ask.

Worse than that, she wanted me to spend a night with Julia—or with her own brother. That way Kevin could see where I was and who I was with and report it. To Ethringer and the staff, it would look like I had come to a more relaxed way of looking at every kind of sexual antic.

Her argument was that Kevin's report would let Ethringer see that I was beginning to unbend a little, and that would hasten the day when I could live off base at her apartment. Maybe

## A Ladder

it would then be our apartment, hers and mine—and maybe hers, mine and Julia's.

There was no way to avoid it. Kevin would be there on time. He had only to deliver me to Eleanor's door and then he could go to his 'bunk-out' with the guys in 4-B.

A few minutes before midnight, Kevin arrived and we were on our way.

What a difference eighteen hours had made. It was not what I dreaded. Eleanor was wearing that fluffy green tunic again, and there was wine and candles and snacks. There was no talk of her friend Julia, or her brother, or of my coming to share her apartment. The atmosphere was more like the first time I had been to Eleanor's apartment, even to the mandolin from far away down the street. Every man has dreams of a night such as this, but not all that many are lucky enough to find two such nights so close together.

If there was a fly in the ointment, it occurred close to morning, not long before we heard Kevin's three taps on the door. And, by then, it was a very small fly, maybe the size of a gnat.

Eleanor did not push her plan. Instead she wove it into the fabric of our after-love-making small talk. It was gentle, it was nudging, it was exciting, it was honest, it was painless, and, somehow, by that time the idea had more appeal than I felt it possibly could. It was almost like it was my idea all along.

And that's how the night with Julia came about.

It was set up, arranged, with every little detail in place for the Thursday of the following week. And, Thursday, as in every fairy tale, turned out to be the perfect night for romance, with moonlight, the smell of jasmine, and a light breeze off the ocean.

The night began routinely. We walked to the apartment. When Kevin knocked on the door, Julia opened it. There wasn't much to her tunic. It was short, with more than generous slashes for her arms. It was another one of those filmy things. I knew what to expect, it was all part of the plan, but this tunic was more than I imagined.



And, if I was surprised, Kevin was even more surprised when Julia explained that Eleanor had had to go to her mother's house because of illness. She took my hand and pulled me inside.

To Kevin she said, "You may stay for a glass of wine, sir, if you'd like."

"No, no, thank you, Miss," he said. "I have another appointment."

After she closed the door she said in a whisper, "Did you see that? Those eyes nearly bugged out. He took in every detail. You looked sufficiently dumb, and I hope I set his mind to working. I brought this shortie from home, just in case I couldn't find anything suitable in Eleanor's closet."

The wine and snacks were ready on the table, but before we were really out of the doorway, she put my hand on her breast and said, "Hey, you look even better than Eleanor said. It'll be very easy to do a friend a favor."

For that moment, I was motionless, a frozen to the ground statue, a dolt. I knew right then—maybe in the back of my mind I knew it all along—this just wasn't going to work.

"Julia," I said. "Forgive me, but this just can't be. You're a beautiful and desirable lady, and I am some sort of dumb clod, but I can't do this. I'm in love with Eleanor, and I just can't do this to her."

"It was her idea, Roger. That's why I'm here."

"I know, I know," I said. "We talked it out, but..."

"Eleanor told me you didn't want to lie, you didn't want a charade—"

"True," I said, "but which is the greater lie?"

"Eleanor has joked about some of your strange customs—ideas I suppose even our people had way back there right after The Event. So you see, I understand, Roger, I really do."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

And it was clear to me that she meant it.

"So we sit and stare at each other for six hours."

“That’s one way,” Julia said, “but it doesn’t have to be a chore. We don’t know each other at all, we are oceans apart, so we can just talk and take little naps, and along toward six, I’ll fix a quick breakfast. There’s no reason we can’t just be friends. If it works out with Eleanor, and I have a feeling it will, we’re sure to see a lot of each other.”

And, that’s the way it happened.

Julia was a nurse at the hospital, on a noon to six shift. She worried that I would have to go to more exercises on the six to noon shift, while she’s be able to get some real sleep before going on duty.

We did get to be friends. She turned out to be more than a short tunic with slit sleeves.

And then came Kevin’s three taps on the door. I was ready for the return trip.

On the way back he said, “Now, that was different. Do you want to talk about it?”

My answer was, “No, I do not,” My tone brooked no answer.

That, too, would be a part of the report.

## Chapter Twenty-One

# SKITTERING WITH THE TRUTH

They were ready for me on the six to noon shift, and, yes, it was more calisthenics. I'm sure that it really was not the case, but it seemed as though they already had Kevin's report, and decided to put me through the mill, just for the fun of it, just to see me sweat.

It was a workout and my pungent body was ready for the swim. The sea that day seemed a little colder than usual, but I enjoyed it. It helped to restore my energy. And, fortunately, there was a let-up. We quit a little earlier than usual. I had at least five minutes to lie in the sun before they were ready to take me back to the room.

And, as I suspected it would be, Tim was there when I got back.

At the beginning, the conversation was casual enough. The usual polite preliminary stuff, easy back and forth. It didn't take long for him to realize that I wasn't going to offer details of the night before.

I saw a little frown appear, and then he said, "I understand she was a real beauty. At this stage in his life, Kevin seems to prefer boys, but he sang the praises of this one, in a gauze tunic, just filling in for Eleanor. Way to go."

"I thought Kevin was just supposed to take me to the apartment and bring me back to the room."

"Oh, come on, buddy-boy," he said, "this is Tim. Don't try to fool old Tim, and don't try to change the subject. You

know damned well Kevin makes a regular report, even if it's only the routine of taking you there and returning you here."

Now, I was on the horns of a dilemma. I didn't want to add a pack of lies to the fraud that I had been a part of and I didn't want to get Eleanor into a mountain of trouble, so I had to be careful with words and expressions. Tim is a smart cookie. He may not have been suspicious of my rendezvous, but one false step out of me and he'd pounce on it.

"You say you're a student of my generation, Tim, and if you're as good as you claim to be, you know that a big part of me still lives with the mores I grew up with. Because of Kevin, you know that I spent a few hours with a very pretty lady. Put the accent on that last word, Tim, a lady."

"One of our girls" he said, "an understanding lady."

"I'll give you that one," I said, "a beautiful, charming, sweet, and, yes, understanding."

What a lucky choice of words. Hell, yes, she was understanding. Any number of girls, even back in my day, would have laughed their heads off. I must have sounded like something from King Arthur's court, "I could not love thee, dear, so much loved I not honor more."

Tim's meaning of the word "understanding" was more carnal than the noble connotation I gave it. Lucky. Lucky for both of us. That way we each understood the night's adventure in a way that allowed for a new subject.

And there was one.

"Dr. Ethrnger feels that you are making good progress lately, but one facet of the problem still marks you, at least in his mind, as hanging back there in the dark ages."

"And I'm supposed to say, 'What's that?'"

"Your smart mouth doesn't help you any, buddy-boy"

"Whatever it is," I said, "why don't you just say it? Why all the preliminaries?"

"OK. Here it is. No soft peddling. He thinks you're homophobic. It's your word, not ours. It's one you understand."



“I don’t have a dog in that fight,” I said. “I’d say he’s wrong.”

“Oh, would you now?” Tim said. “Let me remind you of an incident. Have you ever been to the Museum on Main Street?”

I had—with Waldo when he was studying for his exams. When I didn’t answer he pressed the point.

“Well, have you? Or, are you going to deny it?”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve been there, on one occasion.”

“And you saw the Adam Smith Room, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I saw it.”

“But you didn’t go in, did you? You made a point of passing that room without entering it. Don’t try to lie about it. My roommate works there. He saw you. Carlos said you looked at bronze name on the door, realized what it was, and quickly walked away.”

Yes, I remembered the trip to the Museum and the Adam Smith Room. And, yes, I remembered the Adam Smith story that Tim told me all about how I was found unconscious after The Event.

“And your point?”

“The point,” Tim said, “is that you want to disavow any experience you may have had with another man. Maybe you don’t remember any part of the years you spent in a coma, but the one thing you don’t want to hear about in those years is that all parts of your body were exercised, by men and women—the Techs who saw you through that period—starting with Adam Smith.”

Yes, this part of my “exercise” was a constant theme of Tim’s questions and conversations from the first day I became aware of this place. It was always there, by innuendo, by a myriad of hints, and by that damnable smile of his.

“The incidents are many,” Tim said, “but I’ll give you one that is more recent. It certainly should jog your memory. Think back to the first night Kevin took you to Eleanor’s apartment. You bumped into a guy coming out of the building. There was an immediate attraction that involved Kevin and that man. You

saw it. You questioned Kevin about the mumbled word the man said to Kevin. Kevin said the look on your face when you realized what had happened was like something he had never seen before and for that reason it became a part of his report, a significant part. He also said that you gave him the once-over the next morning, looking for what Kevin didn't know, but I would call signs of debauchery."

Of course, I remembered that night. And the next morning.

"It was unsettling, wasn't it?"

"That was an older man, he was just a kid."

"Would it have been OK if it happened to be another kid? Think before you answer, Roger."

"That would have been better."

"Better, but still not OK?"

"I suppose so."

"You are a sexual being from your very early days, Roger. We all are. We've been through all that before. And you didn't go blind, did you?"

I didn't respond to that one. I just let it hang there.

"So, buddy-boy, we must conclude that Dr. Ethringer is right. You still have a few hang-ups to be sorted out, problems to confront. You are learning, albeit slowly. Way back before your time, a German guy named Ludwig Borne said, 'Losing an illusion makes you wiser than finding a truth.' It's time you consider the verity of what that wise man said."

Tim paused for thirty seconds or maybe a minute. Our little domes of silence sometimes can feel like forever. He wanted to be sure Borne's adage had time to sink in to my thick skull.

"And, that will be my report today," he said. "Roger is coming along, but he's not there yet."

That was the end of the orientation. Good. I'd had enough.

And then he said, "Back to that thing we talked about before, expressions I find in my reading. Some are real gems. This is one I like: 'Shit, shave, shower and shampoo.' Now that's poetry."

"What kind of stuff are you reading, Tim? That's a vulgarity."

“It may be, but it’s poetry. And it’s easy to say. It just slides off your tongue. It’s musical.”

I said it again, “What are you reading?”

“It’s a guy’s story. All about his experiences in your World War II.”

“Well, you wouldn’t let it slide off your tongue in polite company.”

“Hey, not in your day maybe.”

“And it’s not poetry.”

“Yes, it is. It says a lot in a few words. It evokes a much more complex story, without ever boring you with the details. You just know you’re clean and naked. You get to do the rest of the story in your mind. Pure poetry.”

“Find better reading.”

“You’re something of a prude, buddy-boy. See you tomorrow.”

A prude?

But it was too late for argument. He went through the door as Hensley was coming in.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### **THE ADAM SMITH FARM**

Eleanor had a lot of fun with Julia's account of the night before. It stung a little to be the brunt of it, but her jokes were gentle, and, yes, I suppose at least to her the whole incident was laughable.

She made light of it by telling me that Julia thought I was a great guy and a good sport, and that I even liked her soft-scrambled eggs. And I did. Eggs can get rubbery if they stay on the heat too long.

And, of course, she wanted to know how my session with Tim had gone. She knew I didn't want to lie about it, and she also knew that the night with Julia had been a good deal short of what it appeared to be to Tim.

When Eleanor was certain that the whole gambit had gone off as planned, that Tim and Ethringer were reacting just as she hoped they would, she really settled down. Yes, she had taken a chance. A failure could have knocked her career for a loop.

Tim's reaction to our charade told her she could relax. It was done, it was over and the charade was accepted totally for what it wasn't.

She especially liked the part about the play on words, the way I had used the word "understanding" in one way while Tim was thinking of it in another.

When we had talked that out completely, when she knew every detail of Tim's reaction, she said, "I can tell you, Roger, based on my experience on your case, you are going to be released so you can live here, and soon."



That much was right, dead right. Within a week my whole way of life got shifted around. Not only could I live in the apartment with Eleanor, but all the other sessions stopped. My job—and I suppose you'd have to call it a job—was a six-hour session every day, six to noon, with Tim, in Tim's office.

I had a five-day week, six to noon, in an atmosphere that was altogether different. This was not the bare white room I had been used to being in. Tim's office had a desk and two tucked-way file cabinets, but it was more like a living room, with lamps, comfortable chairs, and some really nice artwork.

My work hours were the same as Eleanor's, so we had the nights and all of the afternoons together, eighteen wonderful hours.

We spent many of those hours at the beach, but there was also a different kind of orientation for me. She wanted me to know the city, every part of it.

"You have to fit in, Roger. People will notice if you aren't as familiar with where you are as they are."

She didn't have to tell me that twice. I remembered the time I had asked a man about the clean streets, and the funny look I got for asking something he thought I knew—everybody knew.

On weekends, when we neither one worked, it was longer trips out into the farmland and the forests that had multiplied since The Event. We'd take a lunch basket and spend the day. On a couple of occasions, we spent the night in the woods and returned to the city the next day.

One day she took me to the old Smith farmstead. All of these forays were new to me, so I never asked where we were going. I just went along, soaking up the countryside, and enjoying the freedom that I had only recently acquired.

But, the Smith farmstead was a little more than I had bargained for.

When we got there—and, yes, it was still a working farm, although, it belonged to the people now and was also a kind of National Park—Eleanor said, "Do you have any idea where you are, Roger?"

I didn't and I said so.

"This is the Adam Smith farm, the place where you were found after The Event."

Well, it was a bolt from the blue.

Two things popped into my mind: This was a place I never wanted to see, it was a story I never wanted to hear again because of its implications, and here I was, brought here by Eleanor. The second thought came naturally: Was this trip Ethringer's doing, or Tim's, and was Eleanor still working with them?

Was nothing sacred?

I don't know how I must have looked to Eleanor, but I do know how I felt. It was as though all the blood had drained out of my head and my face and my neck. I could see, but everything had a yellow tinge to it, and the edges of what my eyes could see were ragged and closing in. Yes, I was still standing, but my legs and my arms, my whole body, felt cold and I had no ability or desire to move.

I heard her say, "What's the matter, Roger. Are you OK? There's an aid station here, I'll call for help."

And, from a thousand miles away, I heard myself say, "No. No."

As the feeling came back to my body and worked its way down my legs, I said, "Let's go Eleanor, let's go back to town."

"You need help," she said.

I said "No. No. Let's go back."

I heard her say, "Roger—"

"Let's go back, Eleanor, now."

My legs were a little rocky, but I turned and started back down the farm road.

As I walked, I remembered the story, not the exact words Tim used, but the gist of it was burned into my brain "...when you didn't wake up, he threw your limp body over his mule's back and took you into town..."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### FARM FALLOUT

On our walk back to town, I managed to settle down a little. And, although she thought it odd—well, more than odd—Eleanor started to understand what had happened to me back at the Adam Smith farm.

For me, it was more of a trudge than a walk, especially at the beginning of our trek. The picture of my body, slung across a mules back, stayed with me. However much I wanted to believe otherwise, it was becoming clearer and clearer that that truly was how it happened. It wasn't a made-up tale. It was my history, like it or not.

By the time we got to the apartment, I was all in. Yes, my body had been built up by all the time doing push-ups and my beach time, but this was more than that, it was a kind of blue funk, it was more than physical exhaustion.

A worried Eleanor hovered around with hot tea and aspirin. In time, I told her what had happened to me out at the farm, and how I had always only half-believed the whole Adam Smith a story. It was just a part of the team forcing me to come to terms with my own sexuality and with the new world I was going to be living in.

"The story is true," she said. "We even have an Adam Smith Room over at the Museum. One day you should go there."

"I've been to the Museum," I said. "I know the room. I just didn't go inside."

## A Ladder

"I'm not your Tech anymore, Roger, but if I were, I'd recommend that you go there, back to the Museum. Since I'm not your Tech, my suggestion is that you talk to Tim about this phobia of yours. Sometimes you may not think so, but he is your friend and mine."

And, yes, I did talk to Tim.

"You don't run from these things, Roger," he said. "You do it best when you meet them head on. They are bugaboos in your mind, and when you take them on, they disappear. One day soon, you'll go to the Adam Smith Room. I'll go with you and then we'll go out to the farm. All of this may upset some of your notions, but you're human, just the same as I am and you react to the trinity I spoke of just as I do. You are a human being with a full variety of emotional reactions, no more, no less."

And, we did. We went to both the Museum and the farm.

The room at the Museum told me a lot about my benefactor and a lot about myself, but it was the farm where the biggest reaction came. At first I had the same queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. As we went from room to room in the old farm house, the feeling lessened. When I got to the downstairs bedroom near the front of the house, the feeling was gone. I was myself again, standing strong and unafraid of tomorrow.

One part of my heritage in this new life was abundantly clear: There had been an Adam Smith, it was a part of my life and, as Tim said about masturbation, I didn't go blind.

As the days passed, I realized that I truly had the world by the tail. I had a woman who loved and understood me, even when she couldn't agree with my notions of how the world should be. She was tolerant with me and patient. In addition to that wondrous happenstance, I had a great job.

I really was no longer "just a specimen," and it grew more apparent to me daily. I was apart of the team engaged in research, and while I was also a link to the subject, I was treated by one and all as a member of the team.



And, Tim almost stopped calling me “buddy-boy.” It was Roger most of the time, and sometimes just Ames.

Now, what we had in those sessions from six to noon was a good deal more like a normal conversation, or, at times, a kind of project we were working on together, trying to dredge up little oddball reactions I had to stimuli of every nature, even the fear I had of failing chemistry in my senior year of high school.

One thing that continued to bug me, though, was the thought of any kind of sexual relation between an adult and a child. Tim was careful not to be sarcastic and I was careful not to be a smart-ass, and we both did remarkably well in that endeavor, even when he had to walk the same ground again and again.

I was like a dog with a bone.

“Sex with a kid—” I said.

“What difference does age make, Roger, if no one is hurt, and if all concerned enjoy the process? Unless you feel guilt—enough guilt to cause you mental anguish—or worse. It’s just two people who have had a good experience, a loving experience, that left each of them better off than they were when they each had a raging fire that need to be quenched.”

“But, my point is, a kid—”

“Kids are sexual beings. Left to their own devices, they will solve their own problems, one at a time, and they will do it naturally and unashamedly, unless someone—someone they respect—causes a repression of those natural urges. When that happens it is a deviation from the norm, and that’s when trouble starts.”

“But, I’m talking about kids.”

“Yes, kids. Kids that don’t see evil.”

“Back then it was called ‘abuse.’”

“I know. I read the literature. Let me tell you what abuse is, Roger. It’s when someone, or some legal entity, or a government thwarts the natural flow. When someone makes another person feel less than normal for something that is normal,

## A Ladder

that's abuse. It's what makes Peeping Toms, voyeurs, people who buy porn. And the rest of the long sad list."

And, yes, I'd been over his list in my mind many times since we first discussed child abuse, and, to a point, I could see Tim's logic, but it was still hard for me to get the gruesome thoughts out of my mind. I'd heard and read so much about monsters who raped children and then killed them to keep them quiet.

"Porn—"

Tim held up a hand. He stopped me dead right there. "A subject for another day," he said. "It's noon, I have a date and, more than that, I don't like to work overtime."

And that ended the session.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### **Double Dilemma**

Back before The Event—back when I was perfectly happy with what I considered a normal life—I was an accountant. I had my own firm. Things had to add up. Logic was the norm. One and one was two. Two and two was four.

That kind of logic may have been something from way back in the old days, but the memory of those days was intact with me, even though they tell me it was eighty-two years ago. It's the number I've heard repeatedly, from all of them, eighty-two, eighty-two years ago.

What a change. I have a new job. I'm part of a research team. And, now, so much of what I believed back then is upside down. In my own mind, my life here still fits much of the norms of yesterday. And, privately, I strive to keep it that way. One and one still makes two, and that is Eleanor and me, a man and a woman, a whole, a unit, cleaving to each other. But, all around me, including Eleanor I'm sad to say, they seem to believe that one and one can often make three. Kevin, for instance—the older man, and his roommate, and Kevin.

Here—and God only knows where here is in relation to the world as I knew it—here, the Kevins are multiplied and I don't even want to think about what the answer to three and three might be.

I try not to show any part of what goes on in my head, but my mind is boggled. Wherever I was then—my world of yesterday—I'm not there now. What I need to do—what I must do—is find a way to live with what is.

I've heard it all from Eleanor and Tim. Real change is a fact of my new life that I must accept: What was was, it's the past; what is is, it's the present.

The rules here concerning marriage—rules that I have no way of changing—makes one fact abundantly clear: There will be no marriage to Eleanor unless I'm able to at least appear to be what all the other free souls around me try to convince me that they are.

Today I'm the one who is out of step, at least according to Tim. I'm the one who is clinging to a set of principles that never was anything but sham in the first place. If I take Tim literally, he says mankind has always been the same. One and one often made three back before The Event, but we pretended not to be aware of it, or, if we, personally, had such desires, they were hidden, sublimated, buried, or mutilated, so that we turned out to be at the very least horribly frustrated or at the outer limits they made us into pure monsters.

Tim's big contention is that mankind—then and now—has always had to follow the trinity, his trinity: eating, sleeping and sexual expression. And that they are interdependent. Thwart any of the three and there's hell to pay.

First of all, I object to his use of the word "trinity." It seems to me to be deliberately blasphemous, but that aside, a great deal of what he says does seem to be down-to-earth and logical. But, logic be damned. When it comes to some of his theories, I bristle, even though, lately, I've tried not to show it.

One of the big smears on my personal page though is Eleanor herself. I'm sure she would agree to marriage, but she thinks it's completely impossible, all because of me, all because, while I'm OK for my job since I'm adjusting well, I'm just not OK for what is required for marriage.

While it's true that back in my day, all marriages weren't made in heaven, and that altogether too many of them ended up in the scrap heap, some of them—just like they are here in Perfectville—were truly for the children and even for a lifetime.



And, yes, Eleanor has reason to be skeptical, even if she was a big part of a sham. She knew that the night I spent with her best friend was staged from beginning to end. She knew that it was all done to move my release faster along the path to the freedom I now have and to my new job.

When it comes time to apply for the license to marry, I don't think Tim will be anything but a plus. His moments of doubt seem to be waning. As we work together, we are becoming friends rather than adversaries, and he doesn't know about the sham or about how I have to hide my feelings sometimes because I don't fully support his trinity ideas.

It's still my feeling that when that fateful day gets here, Tim will be a plus for the marriage, a reliable witness.

The minus might be Eleanor—or even me if I don't think before I speak. And, honestly, I can't be really sure of me because of my tendency to lip-off as I did at the beginning with Ethringer.

I just can't be sure of Eleanor either, not because she doesn't love me and not because she isn't in favor of the marriage and the long commitment that it will bring about. My worry is because of her values, her heritage, her training. I can't completely shed my values and therefore I have to wonder about her. When the moment comes that she has to show her commitment to those stringent marriage vows, she just might tell the truth about my wild night with Julia.

Yes, I am shackled with my inherited set of values, but, equally, so is she.

We are neither one ready to apply for a marriage license. Right now, she is certain that I'm not ready and I'm more than a little unsure of how the pressures of the commitment might affect her.

She is straight forward with her worries about me, so there is a delay in the process, and I tag along with that delay while I try to measure just how much stress she can take.

And, while Eleanor and I are creeping our way along toward actually applying for our marriage license, there is one

## A LADDER

other odd little incident that occurred on my way home after work a day or two ago that gives me pause. It may amount to nothing as Tim says, or it could be Ethringer again. I made an enemy of the good doctor that first day. He hasn't forgotten it and indirectly he never lets me forget it either.

I told Tim about the encounter the next day, and he fluffed it off.

"You're a good looking guy," he said, "you're going to be hit on. It's a compliment. You've lost all that flab and you look great. So what's the big deal? You either go with it or you don't. It's a simple choice."

"But I did nothing to bring it on. I didn't even see the man until he walked up beside me."

"Sure you did," Tim said, "you brought it on by being a fully mature, slim, vibrant guy, Roger. It wasn't your first time and it won't be your last. And, what did it amount to anyway? He has a camp out in the woods. He asked you if you'd like to come out there sometime. Big deal."

Tim didn't see the incident as anything other than an indirect hit, an approach. It was a nothing event in his mind. It could happen anytime, anywhere, to anyone.

But I couldn't help nurturing the thought that never left the back of my mind: Was this Ethringer again? Was this another test?

And why wouldn't I? The same guy, the happy camper, was there again as I walked home the next day after work. He was at a fruit stand about a block from my turn off Main.

Ethringer?

Sure, Ethringer again, just like the touchy-feely experience with the students. Tim was a factor with that student debacle, but Ethringer was mind behind it. Of this I was certain.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### SECOND ENCOUNTER

Tim said it was a compliment to my regained health. To him it was a simple matter. I had been, in his words, “hit on.” No big deal.

When I told him about the guy being there again, just hanging around at the fruit stand, he laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. “Fruit stand?” he said, “did you say fruit stand?”

“What’s so damned funny?” I said. To me this was a serious situation, an Ethringer spy job, and here was Tim knocking himself out laughing.

My question sent him off into another spasm of laughter and when he calmed down, tears running down his cheeks, he said, “You know this, Roger, because I’ve told you about it. It’s not a part of my job, but I’ve made a real study of your slang. In some sectors of your population, the word ‘fruit’ had connotations and when you combine it with ‘stand,’ it makes me think of a spot where prostitutes gather to line up their night’s work.”

And then he started laughing again. “There was poor, little Roger, in the middle of the day, out there on Main Street, just another john.”

“Make fun all you want, Tim,” I said. “This whole thing is another one of his tests. I can tell you this: Ethringer was the last one to approve me for the job with you, now wasn’t he?”

He stopped laughing. “You’re serious, aren’t you, Roger. You think this is some kind of a plot, you think it’s the work of Dr. Ethringer?”

“Yes, I do.”

"He wouldn't do this kind of thing. That's entrapment."

"He doesn't trust me, Tim. Sure he would. The man is meticulous, he leaves nothing to chance."

"And when the next man or woman hits on you, that's going to be Dr. Ethringer's doing, too? And it's going to happen, Roger. You'll be hit on. It happens to me and it will to you. It's natural. It's the trinity. When any one of us sees someone who looks interesting, we'll try to check it out. Some are hits and some are misses. So, get real."

"Funny that it hasn't happened before."

That gave him another huge laugh. "You have a very convenient memory, Roger," he said. "I'll cite two observations of exactly that precise thing, two that I know about—all since you've been among us—beginning with Adam Smith and ending with Kevin. History tells us about Smith. And you, yourself, told me about Kevin."

He waited for that last bit to sink in, and then he said, "It's no big deal I tell you. Someone found you desirable. 'Desire at the Fruit Stand.' Hey, I could write the book."

As he has done many times before, Tim won that point. I had forgotten about the little indirect pitch Kevin had made back before I was allowed to move in with Eleanor.

"I'm interested in this continuing story," Tim said. "Keep me posted on this little Boy Scout/campfire romance of yours. It's not over, not until you end it. Remember what I told you. It's a compliment to your manhood, but you can stop it. Just say 'no.'"

And with that he turned back to his work.

Once again, Tim was right.

It wasn't over. It was a continuing story.

The next time wasn't long in coming. As I walked home in the bright noonday sun, there was the Mr. Camper, window shopping on Main Street. As I walked by, he fell in step beside me.

"My name is Brian," he said. "Is it that you're just not interested in camping?"



What an opening. So I said it straight out.

"It's that I am just not interested in camping or anything else. Just not interested, short and sweet."

I saw the expression on his face. What I said hurt.

Right then I remembered some of what Tim had tried to drill into my brain, and I remembered that my smart mouth had made it so that Ethringer never bothered to have another word with me, so I pulled in my horns and said, "Sorry, Brian, I didn't mean to be blunt, but I am in a committed relationship. I know you'll understand."

He just said, "Sure," and as he did so, he fell out of step with me and dropped back so that, by the time I got to the turn, he was more than half a block behind me.

On the rest of my walk back home, I decided not to relate this last encounter to either Eleanor or Tim. Because of my annoyance with the guy, the camper who called himself Brian, I had been unnecessarily rude, even after I tried to tone it down. Here was a time when one of my grandmother's favorite adages fit just right, or as she would have said, fits to a tee: "The least said, the easiest mended."

But, even with my rudeness, it wasn't over and my suspicions about Ethringer persisted.

The following Friday, out of the blue, Eleanor said, "I have a surprise for you. We're going to do something different this weekend. I've arranged for a campsite out on the island. I've already bought all the things we're going to need. The rest of it they furnish, all the wood and stuff like that."

A campsite? On the heels of the come-on from Brian? Was this Ethringer, as I felt certain Brian had been? Was Eleanor back working with Ethringer, even on a part-time basis?

"Camping? I didn't know this was one of your interests."

"Oh, I'm really not really wild about camping, but one of the girls at work told me about this place. It's not all that primitive anymore. You can cook inside or outside—or you don't have to cook at all. They have a big tent that's a restaurant—well, kind of a restaurant. No big menu, just regular camp stuff,



hot dogs, burgers, and potato salad. That kind of thing. It'll be fun to just get away—maybe move the sleeping bags out under the open sky.”

I didn't say anything. Yes, it all sounded real, like it was something that just happened to come up at the library, but I was wary.

“Oh, I don't know,” I said. “It's short notice. We'd have to get a lot of things packed.”

“It's not a big deal, Roger. I have most of it done. Tonight we can eat at the big tent place, and tomorrow I want to try my hand at a slow-cooked stew. An iron pot with the embers pushed up against for hours on end. I borrowed the pot from Julia. You can help. You can be the vegetable chopper, or you can just sleep-in if you want to. I can do the girl scout stuff.”

It all sounded like a whim, an innocent thing, an idea that might have come up as a result of some girl-talk at the library. But, once burned, ever wary.

I felt certain Ethringer was behind the Brian thing, and I couldn't help wondering whether or not this little weekend adventure might not be a part of the same thing.

It was like a walk near quicksand. Each step better be right. What I didn't want to do is accuse Eleanor of something that might drive a wedge between us, so I put the best face on it I could muster.

“OK,” I said. “What can I do to help get this show on the road?”

“It's all done but the packing,” she said. “It's just knapsacks. I've started packing mine with the food. If you'd carry that heavy iron pot in yours, we'd be about ready for the trek out to the island.”

I put Ethringer out of my mind as we walked out along the beach toward the island and the footbridge across the channel.

It was the first time I had ever been out there and I was surprised to see a series of small cabins back from the beach along the tree line.

“Hey,” I said. “Cabins? High class camping, if you ask me.”

“They’re not for us,” she said. “They’re leased for the season. We rented a tent site. It’s down the beach.”

We walked on.

We came to our accommodation after we’d passed the last of the cabins. Yes, they were tents—at least they were made of canvas, but they were built around a framework, and they had wood floors. There were cots inside, and a small camp stove, chairs and a sizable table. This wasn’t sleep on the ground and a tent flapping in the wind.”

“Hey,” she said, “it’s like she described it to us. Camping deluxe. Cook in or cook out, dine in or dine out. This is going to be fun.”

I check out the site. We had our own little plot, our own fire pit and there were a couple of canvas chairs outside, with two more folded up inside the tent.

Eleanor was right. This could be a lot of fun and, with a breeze fresh off the ocean, our intimacies could take on an altogether different spiciness than the closed-in, comfortable nest we had at home.

Oho! This was going to be a weekend to remember.

And, as planned, we had our evening meal at the big tent with about fifty other people. We had the whole deal: a hot dog, a small hamburger, coleslaw and potato salad, but best of all, not on the regular menu, we had ribs that had been open-fire roasted, dripping in a pungent sauce. Good food and good company. Eleanor knew several of the people around us, but I knew none of them. But, for that moment, we were one big family, so it was a great meal with what seemed like old friends.

We didn’t sleep under the stars that night, as Eleanor suggested we might. A drizzling rain started around nine and by midnight there was a cold breeze coming ashore, so bundling became the order of the day—or should I say of the night.

By morning, the spate of wet weather was gone and the sun was already sopping up the moisture outside when Eleanor brought breakfast in. She made a kind of cooked-on-the-open-fire casserole in an iron skillet. It was wonderful and a little

## A Ladder

on the hot side. I could taste traces of mustard and hot sauce and cheese and a flavor that I couldn't identify. She said it was curry. It was breakfast in bed in a wood-framed tent.

You talk about luxury and to top it off, I had the companionship of one of the world's best looking cooks.

The eight-hour-in-the-hot coals stew for the heavy midday meal, was the final touch, with a nap afterward and the beach after that.

Perfect.

But nothing is ever perfect, is it?

In the late evening we took a walk, back toward the footbridge that connected the island to the mainland. When Eleanor walked over to say hello to some of her colleagues, I stood alone near the entrance to the bridge.

Alone. But not for long.

He was standing right behind me before I had any idea of his presence. It was Brian.

The blunt words came rolling out of my mouth.

I said, "What in the hell are you doing here?"

"Better still," he said quietly, "what in the hell are you doing here, you, the guy who doesn't like camping?"

When I didn't reply, he said, "That's my cabin over there. I'm here often."

"Look, Brian—"

"No, you look. You said you weren't interested and you didn't like camping. Well, the second part wasn't true. You are here, camping. That puts the lie to the second part. What about the first?"

He was like Tim, boring in at me with the same kind of logic.

As Eleanor started back across the lot, he said, "We'll keep in touch, Roger, we'll keep in touch." And he walked away.

Chapter Twenty-Six

**AND THE BEAT GOES ON**

As Eleanor reached my side, she said, "Who was that guy who just walked away. He seems familiar, but I don't think I know him."

"That was Brian, the Happy Camper, the guy I told you about."

She laughed. "Did he follow you here? Boy, this is serious. You guys are destined."

"He leases a cabin here, and it's not funny," I said.

"Yes, it is—or you are. You're making too much of a simple overture, Roger. So, he's interested. Why wouldn't he be? You're a good looking guy. I knew that from the first day I saw you. I just got to you first."

"No more jokes, Eleanor, please."

"Get used to it, Roger. The more you're out among people, the more likely similar approaches are going to happen. It's a compliment to your personal magnetism, you're masculine charm—however you want to think about it."

"You sound like Tim."

"Well Tim is making sense. Tim knows because he gets hit on. I get hit on. If I didn't, I'd begin to believe that I was losing it. I'd be reminded to take another very long look into the full-length mirror."

That blotch on our outing, that little incident, that seemingly accidental meeting, that short encounter with Brian near the end of Sunday afternoon, was the only thing that spoiled a perfect weekend.



Yes, there was a lingering doubt. I still wasn't sure that Eleanor's unexpected desire for a camping weekend wasn't the work of Ethringer. Because I loved her, that lingering doubt was worrisome. After that weekend, though, the one thing I was even more convinced of than ever was that Brian was an Ethringer test.

The next day I had even more proof of it.

As I walked home from work, even before I got to the fruit stand, there was Brian. He said, "Hello, Roger," and he fell into step beside me as I headed home.

But, as I slept that night, I must have mulled over all of these recent events. My mind must have been busy all night long, because by morning I knew, if this truly was an Ethringer test, I was playing it all wrong.

My nighttime brain had started to put things into their proper places. By morning, I knew that if I were in fact adjusting to the new life that I was in, Brian's obvious approach wouldn't phase me at all. And that's what Ethringer's test this time was all about. It was, was I feigning or was my conversion real?

I needed Ethringer on my side. It would make the application for the marriage license much easier. He could make it or break it.

What I had to do was what Tim or Eleanor might do under similar circumstances. If I was ever going to convince Ethringer of my conversion, I had to react as if I had been born to this different kind of morality. To Eleanor or Tim, this wouldn't be a big deal, so I couldn't let it look it was a big deal to me.

Change tactics. Change my reaction.

As we walked, Brian said, "I know who you are, Roger."

Hey, that shook me. What exactly did he mean?

"I have friends where you work. You're the guy left over from The Event. You're the guy that Adam Smith saved."

I said nothing. I didn't break stride or let him have the first clue that I had been jerked into another phase of Ethringer's test. I did wonder, though, who his friend might be. Ethringer himself? Tim? Waldo? One of the PT guys?



“Hey, the way you look, Roger,” he said, “it’s hard to believe you might be 111- or 112-years old.”

That was another shocker. I had never once thought about my age. I knew I was twenty-nine, soon to be thirty. Those other years I’d heard about were not real to me, so they were ignored.

“We all know the Adam Smith story,” he said. “Every school child knows about you.”

Since Brian’s entrance into my life had had sexual connotations from the start, the double reference to Adam Smith was clear, and while I had a hellava lot I’d like to say about it, common sense kept me quiet.

When we got to my turn, I said, “See you, later, Brian. I leave you here. And, thank you for the continuing compliment, but the answer is still no.”

I turned toward the apartment, and he kept on walking.

To my way of thinking, I had done well with that last part of the test with Brian. I tried to think of the incident with Brian—and to keep the thought firmly in my mind—that I had just received a compliment. That’s the way Tim would have looked at it. I thought I had done well, I had kept my lips sealed. One thing sure: Brian could not know or report to Ethringer what I was thinking as we walked along Main. Good thing, too.

When I got home, I told Eleanor about meeting Brian again, but I skipped some of the details of our one-sided conversation.

I did much the same thing with Tim the next day at work.

“I’m not surprised at his persistence,” Tim said. “Brian will wait. Sometimes waiting can add zest to our little peccadilloes. When the apple is ripe, it will fall off the tree.”

“In this case, Timothy, the apple is growing on someone else’s tree.”

“Hey,” he said, “never say never.”

Our work that session was very personal. Tim wanted to know about childhood memories, all kind of memories it’s true, but he did hone in on those that had even the slightest sexual aura.

## A Ladder

And he was good at helping me to recall things that were so far in the back of my brain that I might never have thought of them again without a trigger of some kind. Smells, for example. He wanted to know the first time I smelled something that was so new, so pleasant that I stopped what I was doing to find the source of it.

An easy one. It was not a totally forgotten experience. It was something that enveloped me often in kitchens, or close to kitchens. Whenever I get that first whiff of a cake baking, I feel such a strong sense of being loved, of being safe, or being protected.

With gentle prodding, I was able to remember what must have been my first experience with that smell. It was at my grandmother's house, my dad's mother, out on the farm. I was behind a huge, wood-burning black stove. My grandmother had given me a cardboard box—my cabin out in the woods and a stick to use as my rifle. That was the extent of my toys, or, if not the full extent of them, they certainly were my favorites.

And then it happened. I was surrounded by that warm, sweet smell that pulled me out of my cardboard cabin and around to the front of the stove where the smell was even more tantalizing.

And, yes, when her sheet cake cooled a little, I got a man-sized piece of it and a glass of milk.

And so the session went, from one early memory to another, using smells and colors, and pain and fear, and so many other emotions, until, together, we had brought back memories that had been buried in time. This prodding procedure continued until Tim had reconstructed a time-capsule, a snapshot of the early life of Roger Ames.

A part of my walk home after work in those days was with Brian. It was an everyday occurrence. It was always somewhere along Main Street, not necessarily at the fruit stand, and he always just fell into step with me all the way to my turn toward the apartment.

It was just two guys walking along, two friends who happened to be going the same way. Nothing even remotely sexual

ever happened and nothing that could even that could be construed as sexual ever was said.

He was an engineer on the night shift at the waterworks. He liked the outdoors, the beach, and he played the harmonica. He liked sports and he followed his neighborhood team like a bona fide fan.

True, we were not talking about big league stuff, not as I remembered them. I found it surprising how partisan the neighborhood games were. Loyalties were strong and the games were always well attended.

To me, that kind of fierce loyalty was surprising at first, but not to Tim. As he always did, he had an explanation, a logical explanation.

“What we’re expressing, Roger, is natural, and what you guys did back before The Event was not.”

“And,” I said, “we’re back to Perfectville again.”

He let that one pass. He just calmly said, “You guys, by what logic I don’t know, decided the Mets or the Nets or the Sox were ‘your team.’ Because of the town you lived in, because of the area? Not necessarily. People all over the United States were Cub fans. Explain that one.”

I couldn’t, of course. It was true enough, but no one knows why.

“But, here is the larger point,” he went on to say, “You had no bona fide reason for your choice either. It was arbitrary as far as I can determine. Surely you had no loyalty for a team that was made up of great players perhaps, but players who didn’t necessarily stay with the team. They were sold, traded, or released, and then, sometimes, they turned up with the team you really didn’t like, so it wasn’t that kind of loyalty. You were the fan of a corporation, not a team. They were hired hands. The players were not anyone you actually knew.”

“And, your point?”

“Simple. We are fans because they are our team, neighborhood guys who love the game, not pay for play. They are our people playing against your people. So, if that is Perfectville,

yes, I plead guilty. But, I have a reason for my loyalty. Real pride in the team. Explain yours.”

I couldn't. Not only did players get moved about like chessmen, but teams got moved from one city to another, so area had nothing to do with it.

Tim was right again, but, with Brian, it was more than sports talk.

An odd thing just seemed to happen on these daily walks. Brian became something more than an Ethringer test. I found I was looking forward to our walks together down Main Street. Somewhere along the way I came to realize that he was the first friend I had actually made on my own. Yes, there was Tim and some of the others, and there was Eleanor, but these were relationships that I had by circumstance, not anyone who became a friend and who was not associated with my debriefing.

And, yes, I was still aware that Brian was more than likely a tool of Ethringer, and that we were not really close, but all the same, there was an affinity that I found hard to define.

So, in spite of my first rejection of Brian, I would say we certainly were friends or becoming friends, Whatever he felt toward me was not ever pressed again. Therefore, if the Brian test was an Ethringer ploy, I felt the test was over.

And, then, as abruptly as the whole thing started, it stopped. The next day, there was no Brian. I marked it down to his personal schedule, but that was not it. He wasn't there on Main the next day, or the next or the next.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### **Still Wary**

On the third day that Brian failed to show up for our walk down Main, I mentioned it to Eleanor. She just blew it away.

“Isn’t that what you wanted? I thought you resented the pushy way he joined you on your walk home,”

“Well, yes and no,” I said. “I think I was getting used to him. We had finally dropped the whole sexual thing and we were just friends, or at least I thought so. I think the Ethringer test part of it was over.”

“Dr. Ethringer? You’re still hanging onto that?”

I know I irritated Eleanor and Tim with my thought that Brian was an Ethringer test, but the idea was still in the back of my mind, even though, recently, it had receded—well, maybe not receded, but it had become less important because I didn’t rail at Brian’s past overtures. When even a hint of a new one cropped up, I just let it slide by. I really thought the test was over and that I had passed with honors, but when Brian just abruptly stopped being there as I walked home, the idea rushed back to the front of my brain.

If I am not altogether honest with Eleanor, it’s because I omit, not that I fudge the truth. So I just said it.

“Yes, Ethringer. When you walk with the guy every day, day after day, when you are beginning to look at him as someone who might, in time, be a good friend, and then it stops. Just stops, no explanation, no nothing, you have to know that something is wrong about the whole deal.”

“Maybe he got transferred, maybe he got reassigned.”

"Just like that? Here one day and gone the next?"

"It happened to me and you, Roger. Remember?"

And, yes, I did remember all too well.

"You have a valid point," I said. Yes, it could happen that way, but that would only add fire to my theory. You were jerked away by Ethringer. By Ethringer! Of course I remember."

"So, you're back to Dr. Ethringer again? Brian was only a plot, a test?"

There was more haggling about that one. I stayed with my suspicions and Eleanor was just as certain that such a thing would be alien to someone as honorable as her Dr. Ethringer.

When she said, "Let's pack a sandwich and go to the beach, I was happy to have the subject changed.

But, it still rankled back there in the inner workings of my brain. It was still the only reason for Brian's behavior that made any sense. Ethringer may be as honorable as Eleanor thinks he is, but he is sly, he is tenacious, he wants to be sure of what I am and what I am not. I have been the core of his career. I was his project. He will leave no stone unturned. When Eleanor and I apply for a license to marry, his opinion could very well be asked for. The worrisome thing to me is what he might say if he is called on to be a witness. I've never been forgiven for my behavior that first day. He called me a smart-ass, and, on reflection, he was so right.

Tim's take on the Brian disappearance was replete with sexual undertones or overtones, although he basically agreed with Eleanor that there could be any number of valid reasons why Brian was called away or whatever it was that happened to him.

Tim honed in on my interest in Brian.

"Whatever the answer to your question, Roger, we'll know eventually," Tim said. "If I hear of anything, I'll tell you, but until then just put Brian out of your mind and let the facts surface. And they will. Nothing ever is a secret for long—not here, not in Perfectville."

It was a jab at me, but I just let it pass.

And then he said, "The part that interests me, though, is your attitude. He seems to have dropped you, you miss him, and you feel done-in by the untimely way it happened. Forgive me for saying so, but you're acting like a jilted lover."

The remark made me angry, but I hope I didn't show it. My whole attitude now was to behave exactly as Tim might have, had he just been given the sexual needle.

"It's nothing like that, Tim. But, yes, I did think of him as a friend."

"Just a friend?"

"That's it. Nothing more."

"Just a casual friend."

"Yes."

"You've been living among us—outside the compound—for only a short time, Roger. You haven't had much of a chance to meet a lot of people, so, for the moment, let's try to go back to your other life where you had a host of friends, some close and some not so close. Are you telling me that, back then, you never had one of them drop out of your life for a period of time? Just here today and gone tomorrow? For whatever reason—a job, a death in the family, a new romance? I have. Many times. For many reasons."

It was classic Tim, boring in with logic. I couldn't fight back with the facts as I saw them. This was different, Brian was not just a casual acquaintance. This was a Ethringer plot, a test.

But, Tim and I have been down that road before, and he dismissed the Ethringer plot theory out-of-hand. To bring it up again could easily shatter the illusion that I had completely dropped the old ways and taken up the new—that I was now just another citizen in this brave, new, primitive society. I couldn't chance that.

"I don't hear a denial, so let's look at the whole picture without the bias that I know still lingers."

He leaned back in that squeaky swivel chair, put his feet up on his desk, arms behind his head and eyes closed. I'd seen this approach before. He was going to lay it out, one, two, three.

"Brian is a nice looking young guy, intelligent, healthy, vital, who has expressed an interest in you. Now, whether you are going to admit it or not, when someone finds you interesting, or handsome, or in any way worth knowing, it's a compliment and you'd be less than human if it didn't ring your chimes one way or another. You don't need to answer. That's a fact of human nature and we both know it.

"And, as for you," Tim said, "Brian's behavior doesn't make a lot of sense, since you seemed to be hitting it off pretty well in recent days. Somehow you feel abandoned by his actions and that hurts. Probably because you feel it's something you didn't deserve. I hate to use the word 'jilted' again, but right now I can't think of a better one."

I let him go on for a while, and then when I had a chance to turn it off, I tried to find a new subject, one that was not so personal

"I need your advice on something important to me, Tim," I said.

It was the right tack.

Ask for advice, ask for help, or ask for mercy and you get immediate attention. You can turn an enemy into a friend by putting them in the catbird seat with this simple request. It makes them important. It is an indirect, nearly irresistible, compliment.

The Brian thing was over, at least for the moment.

"I'd like to file the application for the marriage license," I said. "Eleanor says it's too early. She thinks we only have one shot at it, and everything must be just right, everything in place. She doesn't want to do anything that might kill the idea. That's her opinion."

"I side with Eleanor. It's a big step. The evaluation of such an application is rigorous. I know you well, Roger, and I can sense it when you waver—and you do waver. Yes, you're



almost there. But, right now, you're happy, Eleanor is happy, the trinity is working well on all three ports. You're obviously healthy so you're sleeping well, and Eleanor takes care of the other two."

I wanted to tell him he harped way too much on one port of his trinity, but the nice Roger, the cautious Roger, the new Roger prevailed. I said nothing.

"What's another three months or six?" he said. "You're planning on the long haul, twenty, thirty, forty years—maybe a lifetime."

"A lifetime," I said.

"We hope so, but as one of your poets said, 'The best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray.'"

Tim ended the Brian incident.

Tim ended the marriage idea.

Another day, another downer.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### **HOLEY BRIEFS**

What a difference a day can make. When I spoke to Tim last, it was all negative. As concerned my marriage, he was with Eleanor all the way. Wait, wait, wait. That's all they knew. Relax. Don't push it. Wait. Time will tell you when to approach the marriage thing.

That's not the way it was in the office the next morning.

Tim was excited. He was ready to help me put the cart in motion. And I mean right now! He was eager for the next step—the preliminaries to the application for marriage. He was just plain gung-ho. He wanted to get on with the paper work. He wanted the three of us to start preparing for the questions and the prodding that Eleanor and I would go through when we finally got before the Licensing Board.

What had caused this epiphany? The abruptness of the change in Tim's attitude finally made me say something, even though I knew it would have been better left unsaid. Sometimes, when you're just naturally a mouthy guy, the words just blurt out.

"When did you talk to Ethringer last, Tim?"

His answer was instantaneous.

"Now, don't start that, Roger," he said. "The Licensing Board meets at the end of this month. I want this to be as smooth as glass, and we don't have that much time. Eleanor shouldn't be a problem, but sometimes with your smart answers you can be."

"But Ethringer figures into this, doesn't he?"

“Let’s just say that the winds seem to be in your favor, buddy-boy.”

And with Tim’s old familiar use of the words “buddy-boy,” I knew that the nice Roger, the converted Roger had better come to the fore.

I said, “When do we start?”

He must have expected more of my prying about Ethringer because he stopped, gave me a quick, hard look. A look that said more than I cared to hear. I did what I had to do. I looked back boldly, but not defiantly.

I said, “I’m ready.”

“Better,” he said. “One hellava lot better.”

We eyed each other like two cur dogs that meet in an alley for the first time. It was a test of wills. It was up to me.

So I said it again, “When do we start, Tim?”

The tension was over. It was back to the enthusiastic Tim that I had encountered when I arrived at work that morning.

“I’ll walk home with you today, Roger. It won’t be like your friend Brian, but you’ll just have to adjust.”

I didn’t take the bait. I let the Brian comment pass.

“We’ll meet Eleanor there and the three of us will go down to the office to register and pick up the paperwork. After that, I’ll take the newly engaged couple to lunch. How’s that?”

The tempest had subsided. Our morning’s work consisted of more probing into the earliest of my memories.

We had a coffee break about ten and that’s when Tim, only a few years older than I am, came up with a little fatherly advice. This struck me as funny. Fatherly advice from a contemporary and from someone who has never been a father, or who, so far as I know, never wanted to be.

The smart-assed part of me wanted to prick that balloon, but my newfound damper on sarcasm stood me in good stead. I just let it pass as I had done with the Brian dig.

The gist of his fatherly advice, as it always seems to be with Tim, had the usual antecedents to the last leg of his trinity.

## A LADDER

"Back in your day," he said, "marriage had pretty well degenerated into a 'sometimes thing.' When it happened, and if it happened, it was easy to do and easy to undo. That easy factor was complicated on occasion by finances or children or a pet, but when these were not a factor, marriage was a matter of law and not much else. What you and Eleanor are about to do is a great deal more difficult because here the sole purpose of marriage is continuity and the purity of the family line."

"I know," I said. "I've had two great teachers, you and Eleanor."

"Let me get to my point, Roger. I'm fully aware that you understand the enormity of the step you about to take, but there is another side of it that you don't seem to understand at all."

Another side of it?

"Marriage is about having children."

Oh, boy, the smart-ass in me wanted to jump on that one. What idiot wouldn't know that?

"You wear briefs."

"Almost all the time," I said. "I feel naked without them."

"Being married is about having children, about being fertile."

"So?"

"So, I may have mentioned this to you before, but the mechanics of your private parts are intricate. The gonads are engineered to rise and fall, depending on outside conditions. If it gets cold, they rise to protect the integrity of the sperm. If it's too hot for that process, they drop down to a more comfortable level, for the same reason."

I didn't really recall whether or not we had ever had such a conversation before, but this was his theme. He was back to his favorite part of his trinity.

"Interesting," I said, "and, yes, I am aware of what you might call the gonadal tides, but I'm not sure of your point."

"It's simple" he said. "You wear briefs. Briefs tend to bundle the whole package up close to your hot body. The rise and fall—the natural event—is constrained, it is unable to function



as it was designed to do. Sperm can be damaged. The tides, as you call them, are unable to do their job. By your so-called civilized behavior, your feeling of nakedness, you have thwarted nature.”

“Oh, come on, Tim” I said, “Get real. Men who wear briefs father children.”

“Yes, they do,” he said. “Because nature always makes an abundance, so that life will go on. The seeds of nature far exceed the need. Dandelion seeds blow in the wind by the millions so that some of them will by happenstance find a wonderful place to start a new life. Every Spring I think they all might have found my lawn to be the perfect home. Nature’s wealth is random, even wasteful, but we can’t change it, it’s not our design. So, ask yourself, by staying with the briefs, is this the chance you want to take with your son or would you prefer the start of a life that hasn’t been possibly compromised?”

All of what Tim said made perfect sense, especially when it came to what kind of a start you might want for your son, but what he was saying was the double-first cousin of nudity. That I was aware of, outright nudity wasn’t practiced here, although near nudity and nudity was certainly tolerated.

“Forgive me for going back to the old days, Tim,” I said, “but we had an adage, an expression that I remember: ‘Cleanliness is next to Godliness.’ I can’t see going briefless.”

“And no one is asking that. I wear modified briefs. My design. The seamstress at Main and Market modifies them for me.”

“Modifies?”

“She cuts a hole in the lower front section and then hems it, binds it was tape. Here, I’ll show you. I brought you your very first pair of modified briefs.”

And out of his briefcase came a pair of white briefs with a hole instead of a pouch and a slit. They looked funny to me, but I could see how they would easily let freedom ring.

“I’ve been wearing modifies for years now, and word has spread. It’s Faye’s shop. She’s busy all the time and has hired about a dozen ladies to help with the influx of orders.”

"Well, I'll be damned," I said. "They look funny though."

"They do the trick. You're back closer to nature. They're actually more comfortable and there's no chance of damaging sperm. And that's what you're going to want. Strong, healthy children."

And then it occurred to me, Tim wasn't married and, so far as I knew, had no plans for marriage, so why would he go to the trouble of protecting his sperm count or even thinking about it? Why would he even think about designing modified briefs?

"You're not thinking about marriage are you Tim?"

He was surprised at the question and it showed on his face.

"Certainly not," he said. "Marriage is a commitment I'm not ready to make."

"Then why the effort to preserve the integrity of your sperm?"

"Oh," he said, "it wasn't reproduction that brought this about, it was comfort, and, more than that, it was staying as close to the natural needs of our bodies as I could. I'm really a nudist I suppose. I like to keep clothes to a minimum."

And, yes, I had been aware of his disdain for clothes, even before we went to the beach together.

"My desire for gonadal freedom might even harken back to my student days." Tim said. "I thought the Scots and the Greeks had the right idea. Skirts. And nothing under. I found other interesting things in some of my non-assignment reading. I don't know how or where I found this one, but the little verse stuck in my head because it said some of you guys back then were minimalists, just like I am."

And then he recited these words:

"If you want to be a man,

"Be a man in full.

"Let your balls hang down

"Like a Jersey bull."

Well, that nearly jerked me out of my seat. Tim was never vulgar with his third-leg-of-the-trinity talks, but this little ditty certainly was.

“Don’t get up tight, Roger. Yes, it’s a little bit vulgar, but it’s real. Real always takes the edge off vulgar, at least in my mind.”

And, he was right again. Real can be vulgar. A lot of four-letter words are considered vulgar, and sounded vulgar in my day, but love is a four-letter word, too, isn’t it?

“Let’s go,” Tim said. “It’s getting on toward quitting time. We can go by Faye’s shop and order a dozen of those modifies, so you can get used to them before the wedding.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### STEP ONE

Yes, we stopped at Faye's shop where I ordered modified briefs, and, yes, there was no sign of Brian as we walked down Main to the apartment, and, yes, Eleanor was already home before we got there.

Tim gave her the news before I had a chance to even say a word. The suddenness of the change in plans knocked her back on her pins, just as it had me. It was a change that was as totally unexpected by her as it was for me. Whatever it was and however it came about, I was glad to see that Eleanor was not a part of the rush to the altar. In fact, the night before she had again reminded me that I simply had to learn to be more patient.

I felt quite sure this change in plans was the last thing either of us thought possible. We were being rushed into the preliminaries of the biggest event either of us would ever take in our lives.

And there stood Tim, beaming like the happy father of both of the betrothed, herding us along to the Registry.

In times of stress or pressure, we all tend to do dumb-sounding things. It was such a time for Eleanor.

"I have to shower," she said.

"No you don't," Tim said. "We're just going to file the application and pick up the paperwork. It shouldn't take ten minutes, and then we'll go to lunch to celebrate."

Eleanor is an easy-going, relaxed, laid-back girl, but I found out early in our relationship that when she does take a firm position, stand back, because there's no changing her. Based on

their years of working together, if Tim didn't already know about this her, he certainly became aware of it right then.

"It's the beginning of the biggest thing in my life, Tim, and I'm going to dress for it. You guys can wait."

And wait we did.

When she came back into the room she was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. The girl in the practical, daytime tunic was gone and was replaced by a vision in pale blue and there was a single pearl on a tiny chain at her neck.

I just said, "Wow!"

There was the barest acknowledgment of my expression of awe, and that's exactly what it was.

"It's a special day for me, Tim, and for Roger. You either understand it or you don't."

She was at the door before we could even recover from the vision we had just seen.

"Come on, guys," she said. "Now I'm the one in a hurry."

As Tim said, the time at the Registry was not long. The application was short, but the paperwork for the first step of the process was even larger than I thought it would be, even though I'd been told often enough that it would be extensive.

We bundle it up and headed for The Trap, the restaurant where Tim had reservations.

"We'll be early," Tim said. "but the bar there's a great place, right on the water's edge."

After lunch, Tim stayed at the bar. Eleanor and I walked home, hand-in-hand. Not only was the rest of the day ours to celebrate, but I had the next day off.

Yes, primitive and backward though it was here in my new life with the turtle-slow march of time, life can be beautiful.



## Chapter Thirty

### REHEARSALS

For a little more than the next week, the projects we were on were put aside. Tim hovered like a mother hen as I plowed through the paperwork that was required. Of course he was helpful, but a lot of the old Roger came rolling back into my brain. I resented his help. I felt he was intruding in my life. Stupid? Yes, but true, especially since I knew full well that his review of my work, his suggestions for alterations of my wording, would make the whole process work better.

I held all that back pretty well. Bad mouth zipped. I kept telling myself, repeating it like a silent mantra, "Perversity, thy name is Roger."

"The paperwork is the easy part," Tim said, "it will all be reviewed by the Board before you and Eleanor go in there for the your appearance. But the appearance is the hard part. The room is imposing. Yes, the appearance is the part that can be tricky. Your oral answers will be vital. You just have no idea of what the questions might be, or how the process will go—what they may come up with, past, present, or future."

"Honest answers. That will do it." I said

And, yes, with that little halo I placed over my head, that almost truth that I said so glibly, Tim seemed to relax a little from the pressure pot he'd been stewing in all morning.

"Let's have coffee," he said, "let's lean back and ponder what we have to do before the Board meets."

And we did. For the next forty minutes it was as pleasant and easy-going as our work had been before the rush to the

marriage started. My mind shifted to neutral and I forgot my mantra. Instead of “Perversity, thy name is Roger,” it became simply “Thy name is Roger.”

But, all good things come to an end, don’t they?

When the coffee cups got rinsed and put away, the next phase began.

“Now, the hard part,” Tim said, “the vital part, where what you say is cast in stone, where you can’t go back and edit it like we have just done with this sheaf of papers.”

“I thought our appearance before the Board was last—the last element,” I said.

“It is,” he said. “Eleanor won’t have a problem, Roger, but you might. For that reason, let’s use these next few weeks as a kind of dress rehearsal. I’ll represent the Board, I’ll ask the questions, and we’ll both look at your answers with the very cold eye that is sure to happen when you two go before the Board.”

Well, at least he said, “...we’ll both look at your answers.” Still, I didn’t like it.

Finally I said, “You make it sound like an act, a performance.”

“Yes, buddy-boy I do and to a degree that’s what it will be. Don’t try to fool old Tim. I know you too well. Nobody has had more experience at undoing the tight-assed ideas you were reared with than I. And, nobody knows better than I that you’ve come a long, long way in the process, but you have not achieved nirvana. Don’t try to con me, Roger.”

Nirvana! It was a word that made my blood boil. Perfection in Perfectville. No, I hadn’t achieved that.

When I said nothing he said, “You still have a tough time with what you guys back then referred to as ‘boy love’ if you were in favor of it and ‘pedophilia’ if you were not.”

He let that bone of contention sink in.

It was a few minutes before he spoke again and the ranting tone was gone. “Look, Roger, there’s no one who has done more for you than I have,” he said. “Yes, you are my job, but

to me it's more than that. In every way I could, I've given you a ladder out of darkness. Sometimes I think your climb up that ladder has been less than my effort to help you. Have I ever thought about quitting, asking for another assignment? You're damned right I have, but each time that happens, you move a little forward and my faith is restored."

I felt ashamed of some of my behavior. The guy liked me. In his mind he truly was trying to help make my transition easier. I knew that. But, he wasn't through.

"If you're going to climb a ladder, Roger," he said, "you have to let go of the rung below in order to reach the rung above."

No more rant. That was it. Then I really did feel like a sheep-killing dog.

"I'm sorry, Tim."

"Apology not needed," he said. "I am me and you are you, and we just have to muddle through."

What a guy. And as though we hadn't had that little maudlin bit, he went right back to the subject.

"We are sexual all our lives, Roger. Whether it is expressed overtly or covertly, whether it's solo masturbation or with partners, we are sexual. I've seen studies, although they were not complete, that even showed masturbation in infants, male and female, before birth."

"You've been through all that, Tim."

"Yes, I have. I know it and you know it, but that's a big sticking point with you. Should that subject come up, it might be the real sticking point with the Board. A rehearsal is the way to be sure you won't ruin Eleanor's chance for marriage."

Eleanor's chance. Not my chance.

He was looking out for Eleanor. Common sense told me that that could well be the case. They were friends of long standing, and, while I was important to Tim's work, his inner loyalty might well be to Eleanor.

And then he said, "Let me ask one question, as a member of the Board might well ask."

I nodded.

“Mr. Ames,” he said, using the lower register of his voice, “the Board and I would like to ask why you are filing a request for marriage to this young lady?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Because I love her and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“Admirable,” he said in the same voice, “but love is ephemeral. It can last a lifetime or it can fade. We love many times in our lifetimes. Love alone does not need a marriage license.”

Now, that was pure Tim O’Dell. Logical, myth shattering, and unfalteringly realistic. My answer just didn’t meet the criteria.

Then in his own voice he said, “You see what I mean, Roger. Your answer didn’t hack it, didn’t come close. That was an old idea. ‘Love is forever.’ Idealistic. Romantic. But, it’s an idea that still exists in the far reaches of your brain. That answer just popped right out. With such an answer, the Board might think you were wasting their time. Maybe I’m fickle, but I’m on the third ‘love of my life’ right now and I’m only thirty-five years old.”

What Tim didn’t understand was that the love Eleanor and I had for each other wasn’t just romantic nonsense or some kind of grand passion that could easily fade. We had an understanding. We were completely comfortable with each other. We breathed the same air. We were one. We might have been fabricated from the same bolt of cloth.

Yes, I know that a similar refrain from lovers has echoed throughout time, but it really was different with Eleanor and me.

We each see things through the filters of our past, through the experiences we have, and, yes, I am well aware that we are not all fortunate enough to find the perfect half for our souls, but fate had been kind to me. It had spared my life during The Event and it had brought me through God only knows what during the 82-years of my coma, so there was a purpose and



that purpose was Eleanor and the children we were sure to have.

Tim didn't understand that all-important truth because his involvement with Carlos was cyclical—real for now maybe, but not deeply loyal. It was, in fact, not loyal at all since both guys were free to wander off the farm at any time something interesting came along, no matter how transient that involvement turned out to be.

Tim didn't understand. Tim couldn't understand.

Common sense told me to tread lightly, that I was walking on unstable ground. Marrying Eleanor was the cornerstone of the rest of my life and Tim, like it or not, was a linchpin.

Eleanor knew me because I could be completely myself with her, as I could not be with anyone else in that little world I lived in. Tim knew me in another way. Tim knew how to prod, how to needle, how to cajole, how smash icons and how to rebuild structures.

Tim knew that maybe I wasn't ready for this marriage, not by the Board's standards, but he liked me—perhaps loved me—enough to gloss over my imperfections so that I might marry Eleanor.

As I had done many times before with Tim, I drew in my horns. I let him be the master potter and I was the clay.

My mind, at that moment, had drifted.

And then I heard Tim say, "Don't screw it up, Roger. Know what marriage is here. It's children. Its bloodlines. It's a contract that lives until the last child is fully mature. The marriage can continue after the terms of the contract have been met or it can be dissolved."

If I had reservations about the need for a complete understanding of what the Board interview might be, Tim's one question wiped those reservations away. Our routine work continued to be set aside or farmed-out while the preparation for the Board meeting continued. And, yes, Tim's questions often bordered on peeling the protection off my private life



and private thoughts, but I went along, because I knew that he was doing me the biggest favor of my new life.

Those rehearsals continued right up to the morning of the day Eleanor and I went before the Board.

I was worried, though. Smart-assed Roger was always there and he was hard as hell to control.

## Chapter Thirty-One

### **THE SURPRISE**

And then the day arrived.

Eleanor had the day off, but Tim insisted that I be in the office at six as usual. He was there and had the coffee going by the time I arrived.

"We have a total of eight more hours," he said. "We won't do the question and answer routine today. I'm confident you're ready for that. We'll just spend the morning in easy, laid back conversation—my ideas and yours. We might even go to the beach for an hour or so, but I do think we should be with Eleanor from about noon until we meet with the Board at two."

Boy, that suited me fine. The question and answer thing, even though it was only six hours every day, had really become a drag. There were times when I felt harassed, pigeonholed and browbeaten, and, while the practical side of me knew it was making the Board meeting easier and safer, the impractical side said, "Screw it. I've had it right up to here." And, more than that, the low-register voice Tim assumed when he was acting as a Board member was getting to be more than that sarcastic side of me could take.

"Coffee's ready," he said, "and I stopped by and picked up a couple cheese Danish and two cream horns."

"Health food."

"No, it doesn't pretend to be health food, but it's like everything else in life. The routine can at times be stultifying. You have to break loose now and then, just to defy common sense. It gives you a feeling of freedom. At home I have a

picture of two young horses on the beach, running wildly through the surf—going nowhere in one sense of the word and going everywhere in another.”

“I welcome both changes,” I said. “the food and the routine. So it’s just going to be chat time, or do we go back to your trinity?”

Tim had a piece of Danish on his fork. He carefully laid it back on the plate and then he said, “Now, Roger, yes, there is something we need to talk about. In the past few days the subject hasn’t come up, but it needs to.”

Something big was coming. When he gave it that little pause before he started, I knew I had breached a protocol. This time I wasn’t sure just what the direction would be, but my last remark had very slight overtones of the old Roger. Tim’s ire was up.

“You have a way, buddy-boy, of irritating by inflection. It’s not just the words. The words almost always seem innocent enough, but it’s what you don’t say in words but do say in inflection, or in a lift of the eyebrow, that blows off the steam cap. You did it with Dr. Ethringer as you very well know, and that peccadillo still haunts you. And, yes, you’ve done it to me on many occasions, most of which I’ve overlooked for two reasons. The first one is because you are my project. I, more than anyone else, has been responsible for the improvement you’ve made in being able to live the rest of your life with us without being someone who stands out from the crowd. It’s for your good, not ours. The second reason, more nebulous, is because I just happen to like you. God alone knows why. Sometimes I don’t.”

“I’m trying.”

“Try harder. You have no choice. You can’t go back. We are all you have. Yes, we’re not as scientifically, technically, or commercially advanced as you were back then, but socially we’re miles ahead of you. No wars, no murders, no jealousy, no name-calling, no inhuman tags. Yes, we have religion, but it’s a personal thing without someone telling us what to do

and how to do it. We would rather plod along than leap ahead without knowing what change will bring.”

“But it is primitive.”

“Yes, Roger,” Tim said, “but didn’t one of your guys—the guy in charge—call your television a vast wasteland?”

He had me there, so I just said, “It’s ox carts and bad roads.”

“Yes, and, more than that, it’s what you call my trinity, it’s food and sleep and—”

“Oh, boy, here we go again.”

“But, we’re happy, were you?”

That gave me something to ponder. Yes, for the times I lived in, I was happy, but it was a rat race. After college, I worked for large firm for three years until I was able to open my own shop. Then it was touch and go, especially at the beginning, and just when it got off the ground, it stopped. My memory of it stopped. Nothing. Not until I woke up eighty-two years later.

My recollection was interrupted by Tim. He said, “You’re happy now, Roger, and do you know why? It’s the three—the trinity. You’re getting plenty of food, plenty of sleep and plenty—”

“It’s ox carts and bad roads.”

“It’s good health. You were on the tubby side, buddy-boy, and look at you now. So let’s wave the banner for ox carts and bad roads.”

Then, as though Tim had had enough of my carping he said, “Let’s go for that swim, let’s run through the surf like a couple of young wild horses. Come on, boy, out of that chair and onto your feet.”

And, that’s how we spent the rest of the morning—without a care, without any talk of the trinity or the meeting with the Board at two o’clock.

When we got to the apartment just before noon, there was Eleanor on the floor with two slices of cucumber on her eyes—just lying on the floor in the sunlight that came in from

long floor-to-ceiling windows that our old antebellum house had in large numbers.

She heard us come in but she didn't move.

"I have ten more minutes with my eye treatment," she said. "Find something to do. Don't bother me. I'm getting ready for the second biggest day of my life."

While Eleanor was lying on the floor with her cucumbers, Tim and I took quick showers and changed into fresh white tunics.

Eleanor had a light, cold lunch ready and we ate picnic-style under the large trees at the back of that old house. It was a peaceful, relaxed, happy time. Eleanor was literally basking in the joy of the occasion, and, strangely, I was surprised at how calm I had become. Yes, the past days had been rough on me with Tim picking at every misstep I took, but in the shade of those century old trees I found a peace that truly surprised me.

Eleanor cleared up the residuals of the picnic lunch and took them inside. She reappeared wearing the same wonderful blue tunic she had worn when we applied for our license to marry.

What a beautiful lady.

"Come on, guys," she said. "We have fifteen minutes to get there."

We were there early, but we were not called early. The Board, with its endless questions, its reams of papers also had a strict adherence to its schedules. At precisely two o'clock, the big double doors to the chamber swung open and we were invited inside.

Eleanor and I were ushered to the front of the room to a table with two chairs facing a long, raised platform with a series of high-backed chairs with green and gold upholstery. Empty chairs. The room was eerily quiet throughout this rather solemn procedure.

The pageantry of it was enough to ignite the smart-assed Roger that I simply had to control that day, but the pomp got



even more intense. On either side of those elevated empty chairs stood a man with a tall ax held at a forty-five degree angle. And to make the whole thing look even more like a 1900s operetta, both men wore what I thought of as doublets with baggy knee pants and hose.

The urge to laugh was huge but I kept a poker face—or at least I hoped it was as unemotional as a poker.

And then, to complicate my misery at keeping all of this under control, the two men, in unison, straightened their axes and struck the floor three very distinct times.

With that the doors on either side opened and the robed judges marched into the room and to their seats. They stood for a few seconds and then, also in unison, they sat down.

Unbelievable.

Yes, Tim, I thought, you guys have come a long way. You take care to make the point over and over again. Well, you may have a more natural life on one hand, but this is certainly not an example of it. Clearly, the silliness of mankind lives on. This just might be an Inquisition as I feared it might be. Was I about to be charged as a heretic?

With a single rap of the gavel, the judge in the center of the panel spoke.

“I want to welcome Eleanor and Roger who have applied for permission to marry,” he said. “These are examples of our young folk who will bring forth the next generation of our little foothold still remaining on earth. We have received their application and supporting papers which have been carefully reviewed by our panel of judges.”

He stopped talking right there and picked up a file which I presume was his agenda.

“Ordinarily,” he said, “the public interview of this young couple would be first in order, but we ask the public’s permission to realign the agenda this one time. In today’s instance, we would like to call on the witnesses at the beginning of the procedure rather than at the end. As you know, if everything

is in order, it is customary to have one witness vouch for the couple, but in this unusual case we have two.”

There was a stirring in the hall and some mumbling, but it was quieted with a light touch of the gavel.

Trouble. Something unexpected.

Tim had been over this with both of us. He was to be our witness. Tim, who more and more acted like our marriage was his idea, would certainly not present a problem, but if there was to be another witness. Who could it be? Could it be an objection? And what kind of trouble did it represent?

Yes, for that moment I felt a quick shower of fear. But, before I could fully grasp this turn of events, the chief judge put the matter before the Assembly.

“If there is no objection,” he said, “we will change the agenda as I have previously described it. Do I hear an objection?” It seemed to me the room got forebodingly quiet. And then I heard the judge say, “Hearing none, we will proceed with the adjudication of this application.”

The chief judge picked up his agenda again, adjusted his glasses, and then he said, “Our first witness will be Timothy O'Dell.

Tim was not a problem. I half listened to what he had to say, while my mind ran back over the events of my stay in Perfectville. Who was the other witness? What a quandary. Could it be Brian? I'd been fairly rude to him in the beginning. Or, could it be Waldo? Or Hensley? My mind raced back over all the staff from the P.T. guys to the service personnel. I'd been rude, sure, and I'd been sarcastic, but had I formed an enemy I wasn't aware of?

I heard Tim explain who I was, where I came from, the improvements I'd made in my health and my adjustment to my new surroundings. I heard him mention Eleanor and the love that he had seen between us, I heard him attest to the fact that we both truly wanted marriage and children, but this was all like a voice from afar, fading in and out.

And then I heard Tim say, "Thank you all for being here and thank you for listening to me so intently. Does anything I have said need clarifying? Are there any questions?"

There was none. I heard the judge thank Tim and dismiss him, and as quickly as Tim got back to his seat, the judge was on his feet again, papers in hand.

"Our next and final witness is a man of letters, a man of stature in our community and one of my dear friends. Dr. Otto Ethringer is—"

I truly did not hear the rest of the eulogy. A cold chill started between my ears and raced down my body. Fear can paralyze. Ethringer! The one I hadn't thought of. I quickly reverted to my Methodist childhood. A prayer was foremost in my brain.

I saw Ethringer come in from the side room and walk up to the lectern that faced the judges.

"Honorable Judges," he said, the voice firm, the words clear. "Many of you know that I am the leader of a group of young men and women who are attempting to find which of the old ways can be adapted to our present day situation without ruining what we have made for ourselves. It is not our intention to rush into anything, no matter how good it may seem, but it is our intention to make improvements where we can. Our first duty is, and always will be, the health and safety of our people. In this endeavor, we have been lucky enough to have one person who has actually lived life before The Event. Separating the wheat from the chaff has been the core of our studies. That person is Roger Ames, who is before you today asking for permission to marry Eleanor Mabry, one of our Technicians. He came to us suspicious of our motives, as well he should be, and as I would have been in his shoes, and he has evolved into a citizen who is worthy of siring our future."

The words I heard seemed to drain every ounce of my being. How lucky that I was sitting behind a table so no one

could possibly know that the strength in my legs had simply drained away.

There was more. With every word he uttered, the realization came to me that the rest of the interview with the Board was perfunctory.

The marriage was a shoo-in.

Only a genuine, bona fide, stupid idiot—only a smart-ass—could screw up the detail now.

I would not fail.

It was well past time for Roger Ames to let go of the rung below and reach for the next rung on the ladder.

Then and there I became a citizen of Perfectville.

the end











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IF YOU'RE GOING TO CLIMB A LADDER,  
YOU HAVE TO LET GO OF THE RUNG BELOW  
IN ORDER TO REACH THE RUNG ABOVE.

## ABOUT THE BOOK:

This is not Star Trek.

Roger Ames finds himself in a world so foreign that he must be conditioned—he must be reeducated—just to live in it. For Roger, time takes a holiday. His old perceptions are turned upside down, downside up, and sideways.

Roger Ames is the alien.

He does not fit in. He is the outsider. Roger is like Alice at the Mad Hatter's tea party, where up is down and down is up.

Yes, it is a shocker. And, it's about a ladder.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack R. Pyle does not write a series. Each of his books is so distinctly diverse that you could easily imagine that they were written by ten different people and not by one bold writer.

"A Ladder—A Futuristic and Iconoclastic Novella" is not an exception. This is a story you will love or hate, but you will not be indifferent to it. You can't be.



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